



*Crina Virgona*

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# Workplace literacy in the aged care and call centre industries

Two-dimensional work

*Peter Waterhouse  
Crina Virgona*

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Funded under the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Adult Literacy National Project by the Commonwealth through the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

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ISBN 1 920895 65 5 print edition

1 920895 66 3 web edition

TD/TNC 77.13

Published by NCVER

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# Acknowledgements

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The researchers are indebted to those who contributed to this research, particularly the employees in the aged care and call centre industries. Call centre operators were interviewed outside work time and we wish to thank them in particular. We thank all our informants, not only for their time, but also for their honest and open disclosure.

We also wish to thank the Communications, Electrical and Plumbers' Union (CEPU), in particular Margaret Williamson, for connecting us with their networks.

We are very grateful to the reference committee for their feedback on our progress and their thoughtful review of the draft reports.

Special thanks go also to our administration support team at Workplace Learning Initiatives, Maree Waterhouse, Connie Stella and Ellen Cousins. Thanks also to the tireless efforts of our transcribers, Kayte Fairfax and Antonia Settle.

# Executive summary

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This research investigates literacy within organisations from two industries—aged care and call centres. It was based on the observation that the dynamics which supported workers with limited literacies in years gone by have largely broken down. The closeted work spaces where work practices barely changed are now rare. The new world of work is one which values flexible employment, self-managed careers and individually negotiated contractual arrangements. Casual employment is the norm for a growing 20% of the workforce; union membership has diminished and the length of time in which employees remain in one job has dramatically reduced. The modern workplace is constantly changing, technology-driven and demanding a highly literate, responsive workforce.

The title of our report reflects one of the key themes emerging from the data of this study. As discussed in the following review of literature (pp.10–23), Lankshear (2000) and others articulate the complex and multi-dimensional nature of literacy. To be fully literate, Lankshear argues, is to be critically literate—critical literacy is the crucial third dimension. This study shows that the opportunities for critical literacy to be developed and exercised by contingent workers in aged care and call centres are extremely limited. Their mandatory work practices—which include literacy practices—leave little space for questioning the status quo. In this sense we might think of their work as two dimensional.

The study was qualitative in nature and involved a two-stage process. The first stage consisted of a communications audit which investigated industry standards and the way they were monitored and supported in the workplace. The second stage consisted of interviews with casual employees or learners, particularly those who claimed to have literacy difficulties. In all, 41 interviews were conducted, half were part of the audit process, the other half were target group individuals.

Two key findings which affected the research process are noteworthy. First, the original research questions were based on the assumption that casual workers would be transient, combining a range of workplaces into their working week. However, this was not true for most workers we located. Second, the number of people we identified with literacy needs was smaller than we had anticipated. Our research suggests that, in order to sustain employment, casual workers need good learning skills *and* other generic skills associated with employability, social and relational abilities and the capacity to read workplace cultures. In this study, people with these generic skills, even when combined with relatively limited English language and literacy, fared well enough—at least they were able to sustain their employment. However, those with limited generic and literacy skills were not represented in our sample and, according to labour hire sources, would not be employed. There were, however, some individuals in the ongoing workforce in aged care facilities who fitted this category.

## Literacies of aged care workers

In aged care, literacies are mediated by the funding and accreditation processes and accountability requirements. These have defined how care workers should behave, what values they should hold, what behaviours and conditions in the residents they should notice or ignore, and what and how they should report. As a result, personal care attendants have adopted a language and way of viewing their clients in line with the sanctioned interpretation of the mandated principles.

Similarly, funding guidelines have fixed prices on certain client behaviours and conditions, reflecting the cost of managing them. On the basis of reports on the condition of residents, funds are made available to facilities.

Universal practices and standards in aged care have been determined by 'proceduralisation' which acts to simplify and 'routinise' the professional work of nurses. This has reduced the cost of staffing the industry and made it readily auditable. The transfer of skills and knowledge between facilities is often taken for granted because proceduralisation has standardised workplace practices. In reality, however, the negotiation and application of skills in different facilities turns out to be quite complex and ambiguous.

Government auditing processes have provided some very positive changes, but they have also shifted knowledge, power and decision-making from experts within facilities to an outside centralised authority.

## Literacies of call centre workers

As with the aged care industry, the literacies of call centre operators are also highly regulated. The operational and cultural literacies of call centres are mostly oral and subject to intense analysis. Through the application of technology, their literacies are micro-managed. Supervisors measure the time taken on calls, on breaks and any time 'off line'. Monitoring is continuous and formal feedback is regular. Autonomy in the interpretation of the operational and cultural literacies is constricted by the objective to provide a consistent, speedy and amicable service, and to promote the 'brand' of the company. Cultural literacy is not only defined by what to say and how to say it, but also who you are on the telephone. Operators learn to detach from any emotional involvement and take on the camouflage of the persona prescribed by the organisation.

For most operators, writing requirements are relatively limited. They work with headsets, computers and patterned formats on screens and keyboards; thus their literacies are mediated by technology. Their notes are usually abbreviated to a formulaic script which bears only limited similarity to traditional written texts. Abbreviations and short message system (SMS) texting scripts are imported and 'hot keys' are used to bring up stored, frequently used sentences. Numeracy is also required since many operators calculate charges and prices for customers.

The literacy practices are shaped by the identity, purpose and expectations of the particular call centre.

## Implications

The study acknowledges the effectiveness of the call centre approach in training its workers. However, it also discusses the stressors endemic to the industry and their implications. Given the temporary nature of employment and the demand for flexible skills, it argues for broader educational agendas. It suggests, however, that aged care facilities have something to learn from call centre approaches. The study also offers concrete advice to facilities which have staff with language and literacy needs.

The report takes up the issue of proceduralisation, and while it acknowledges its achievements, it also signals its inherent dangers and limitations. As more and more resources and human effort are consumed in refining practices of conformity, local knowledge and expertise are diminished and devalued. Local communities of learning and practice are under threat in many facilities. The culture of compliance potentially corrodes notions of diversity, difference and innovation, and may undermine confidence in legitimate localised ways of knowing and practising.



The study concludes with the implications of these new workplaces for policy-makers, vocational education and training (VET) practitioners, and employers. Specifically, these are:

- ✧ The VET system is challenged to serve the broad needs of individuals, the community and the economy, and resist the narrowing of literacy and generic skills for company requirements. To avoid an undue focus on company learning agendas, off-site training can provide a space to address broader educational issues beyond the immediate employer interests.
- ✧ ‘Transferability’, that is, the generic literacy and communication skills which workers can then translate to other workplaces, should be regarded as a significant generic skill requirement, one to which trainers should give more prominence.
- ✧ To deliver holistic training by means of training packages, trainers appear to need a higher level of basic education than the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. They also need continuing professional development.
- ✧ Workshops could be used to encourage trainers to adapt training and assessment flexibly to various work environments, using range statements and evidence guides.
- ✧ Trainers and teachers need assistance to be able to identify the generic skills for ‘transferability’ and to draw these to learners’ attention for further development.
- ✧ Employers can do more to balance the values of proceduralisation with the benefits of workplace learning cultures, to encourage the ‘smart workforce’.
- ✧ In aged care, employers are urged to adopt worker-friendly documentation, alternative appraisal processes, local communities of practice, more appropriate forms of information technology implementation, and more inclusive feedback and training for their contingent workers.
- ✧ While the positive features of their training model are worth disseminating, call-centre employers could also reconsider the costs of its micro-management aspects.
- ✧ Call centres are encouraged to recognise the benefits (for both employers and employees) of the development of generic skills and much fuller use of accredited training and recognition of prior learning. Such strategies will enhance employee confidence, autonomy and capacity for multi-skilling.

# Introduction

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## The nature of the study

This project takes into account the changing nature of employment practices and workplace activity. Pressured by global competition, many workplaces have established structures which allow for centralised management systems and comparative performance measures which may originate offshore. Moreover, systems have been set up which assist accountability and auditing processes and demonstrate compliance with the key documents that regulate industries. These new workplace parameters have defined work activity by specifying what is important, how compliance is demonstrated and how workers can meet the productivity and efficiency requirements. This in turn defines competence and the literacies required to enact it. Fundamental to the system is that work is transparent, hence the need for recording and documenting. As a result, work has become preoccupied with measurement. For some, work has become highly text-based (Cook-Gumperz & Hanna 1997; Jackson 2000; Farrell 2001; Black 2002); for others, time has become the crucial measurement. These factors have dictated the literacies of the workplaces involved in this study.

This study investigates the literacies of workplaces in two industries—aged care and call centres. This is a qualitative study where data were collected in order to understand what literacies are enacted in a set of workplaces in each industry and how these are managed by the workplaces, by trainers and by the employees, particularly casual employees. We commenced with an awareness of the changing nature of work and employment and the increasing trends towards casualisation, outsourcing, labour hire and contract forms of employment. We were also aware of the new and shifting requirements of so-called ‘employability’ skills or generic skills. We assumed that the experience of transience and impermanence in employment would be a key factor, indeed a significant difficulty, in the ways casual workers negotiated the new and changing literacies of the workplace.

We were particularly concerned about the plight of casual workers with English literacy difficulties and we perceived these people to be vulnerable in the increasingly demanding and fragmented labour market. Both industries employ large numbers of casuals who embody part of the ‘flexible and fluid’ workforce described in the literature on the ‘smart economy’. A casual workforce implies high levels of transferable skills carried from one workplace to the next. We wanted to find out how skills, particularly literacy skills, are transferred between organisations, and how workplace standards are established and sustained with casual employees.

The experience of this research has not highlighted the issues of transience in quite the way we had anticipated. We encountered the contradictory phenomena described by Watson et al. (2003) as the ‘permanent casual’ employee. This is not to suggest that the experience of transience is not a real phenomena and a genuine concern in other contexts. However, in the particular workplaces we studied, casual employment was not necessarily characterised by transience. In light of this finding we have adopted the language used by Billett (2001) and we speak of ‘contingent workers’—a broader category of employment which includes casual, labour hire, sessional, contract and part-time employees. Our study did not address part-time employees; however, the other categories were evident.

This study builds upon the research conducted by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) into generic skills and the changing nature of work. It investigates themes of workplace literacies, transferability and the contingent workforce. It has led us to a deeper

understanding of the nature of contingent employment and the demands faced by workers in increasingly textualised workplaces.

## Research questions

The research questions framing the study were as follows:

- ✧ What are the multiple literacies demanded of contingent staff by employers, including those with or without training at Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels I–III, working in the sectors of aged care and call centres?
- ✧ What strategies have contingent workers developed to facilitate the transfer of literacy skills?
- ✧ How are employees prepared for the literacy and communication demands of different workplaces?
- ✧ Is transferability taught formally or informally and, if so, does it ease the transfer of skills between workplaces?
- ✧ How do workplace trainers and training providers support trainees to develop transferability in literacy and communication skills?
- ✧ What frameworks and practices can aid:
  - ◆ the transfer of skills for contingent employees?
  - ◆ training personnel and employers in maintaining standards with contingent workers?

# Literature review

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The key themes which underpin this project are:

- ✧ new modes of employment
- ✧ adult/workplace literacy, language and numeracy
- ✧ generic skills and aptitudes, notions of employability
- ✧ the transfer of learning between worksites.

The discussion of the literature begins with the first of these themes—the context of casualisation and ‘non-standard’ employment which frames this study. We then move into consideration of workplace literacy and what it means to be literate in a workplace. The discussion of literacy, or literacies, is followed by an examination of some of the literature addressing issues of generic skills and the aptitudes which some identify as employability skills. The final section of this chapter addresses some of the literature relating to transfer.

## New modes of employment

A great deal has been written about the changing nature of employment, including Waterhouse et al. (1999), VandenHeuval and Wooden (1999), Hall, Bretherton and Buchanan (2000), Marginson (2000) and Watson et al. (2003). The phenomenon of the gradual increase in national casual and part-time employment figures demonstrates a high acceptance of this type of employment in Australian industry by comparison with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Hall, Bretherton & Buchanan 2000). Casual employment describes the employment arrangements for 20% or more of the workforce<sup>1</sup> which has been the case for more than a decade (VandenHeuval & Wooden 1999). This phenomenon is:

... primarily attributable to increases in male casual employment, which increased 115% in the ten-year period to 1998. In Australia only 59% of the workforce is now employed as permanent employees. (Falk & Millar 2002, p.25)

Addressing the question of ‘What is non-standard work?’, Watson et al. (2003) cite figures showing increasing trends for casual employment across the Australian workforce. For males the figure has risen from approximately 12% in 1988 to about 24% in 2001. For females the rates are even higher, exceeding 30% in 2001. Figures on casualisation for the particular industries under investigation are difficult to extrapolate from the available data. However, some indication of the trends in these sectors might be gained from the 2002 figures available for health and community services (22.5%) and communication services (14.5%) (Watson et al. 2003, p.69). In both cases the figures show increasing trends towards casualisation since 1985. The communication services industry, in particular, shows a dramatic increase from only 4% casual employment in 1985.

Watson (2002) notes that unemployment figures are improving, but full-time employment is decreasing; hence low-paid under-employment is increasing. It appears that we have reached a point

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<sup>1</sup> Figures include ‘owner–managers’ who are better described as contractors rather than casuals. Hall, Bretherton and Buchanan (2000) report Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures (1998) where 17.7% of the workforce self-identified as casuals and 19.9% were classified as owner–managers of incorporated or unincorporated enterprises.

where 'non-standard' work (casualisation, outsourcing, contractual and tele-work at home) no longer warrants the term. It appears, therefore, that this mode of employment is one of the predictable features of the workforce.

This trend away from permanent employment has been monitored with a sense of concern by many researchers.

The logical outcome of this trend is that those in society who are most vulnerable, including those with limited literacy and numeracy skills, will be more likely to be unemployed.

(Falk & Millar 2002, p.27)

The decline in unionism and the increasing reliance on individuals to manage their own careers, skill development and employment makes for severe vulnerability among those with least financial and educational capital (Virgona et al. 2003). The lifelong learning agenda feeds on the responsibility of individuals to develop their own skills (Castleton, Sanguinetti & Falk 2002; Waterhouse 2002). Researchers have particularly drawn attention to issues of training for non-permanent employees in a belief that non-standard employment prevents access to training, which would exacerbate the vulnerability of this group of employees (Hall, Bretherton & Buchanan 2000).

While VanHeuval and Wooden found that there was no evidence that 'outsourcing has a deleterious impact on the amount of training received by employees' (1999, p.35), they also found that the personal qualities of non-standard employees predisposed some to access training on their own initiative. Personal attitudes, motivations and relationships were determinants of whether casuals received training. Hall, Bretherton and Buchanan (2000) reached a similar conclusion but also noted that no employer was interested in providing foundation skills to casual employees. They were looking for a 'near fit' for the job they wanted filled so that prerequisite skills would exclude those who could not perform readily. Research by Virgona et al. (2003) on employers' approaches to training has drawn similar conclusions. Billett (2001) observes that contingent workers (contractual and/or part-time) do not have the same opportunities as full-time workers to participate in training or to share the workplace learning gleaned through decision-making, problem-solving or knowledge generation activity within workplaces. Most of this activity takes place in daylight hours and often among selective groups of employees:

Affiliations, gender, race, language, workplace cliques or the basis of employment (e.g. whether part-time or full-time) can marginalise workers. These workers may have to struggle to gain access to the activities and support required to develop expertise in such contested workplaces.

(Billett 2001, p.49)

A number of researchers have noted that casual employees are more likely to supply their own training (Wooden 1996; VandenHeuval & Wooden 1999) which corroborates employers' expectations of 'near fit' casuals.

The reason employers give for using casual labour is to increase the flexibility of the workforce. The most frequently reported motivators were having to deal with high-peak production and providing specialist skills (VandenHeuval & Wooden 1999), but there is also considerable interest in off-loading employee responsibility, risk, management and training burdens (Watson et al. 2003; Hall, Bretherton & Buchanan 2000; Waterhouse et al. 1999). Hall, Bretherton and Buchanan also found that decisions to employ casuals were considerably influenced by economic rationalist thinking which focuses on product rather than people, and engages with managing suppliers in preference to participating in 'non-core' activity.

## Perspectives on the casualisation of the labour market

An underlying concern for the threat to social values posed by the casualised labour market underpins the comments of many researchers in this field (Sennett 1998; Schofield 1999; Marginson 2000; Jackson 2000; Payne 2000; Falk 2002; Falk & Guenther 2002; Watson et al. 2003). The employment decisions of economic rationalists do not always sit well for advocates of community capital (Cox 1995) and social equity. Notions of community capital give enterprises

and work organisations a prominent place as contributors to community. Community advocates call for a widespread recognition and understanding of the impact of industrial decisions on local and global communities and are highly critical of the changes within employment practices and elsewhere which appear to show scant regard for values of community wellbeing:

Change and knowledge are now not seen as necessarily good. Education and training, once seen as the engines of progress and better futures for all, have been transmuted into investments in human capital but not social capital. We have become far less certain that society will automatically improve apart from more technology and material goods.

(Cox 2002, p.1)

The casualisation of the workforce has often been quoted in evidence for such sentiments. However, there are other views on the phenomenon. Some researchers explain that industry is in transition from an 'old' economy to a 'new, knowledge' economy (Drucker 1993; Gee 1994) and that prosperity lies in the new rather than the old. Pink (2001) describes with elation the dynamic and autonomous world of the self-employed 'free agent'. Falk and Millar (2002) outline the features of the workforce of the old economy where literacy is low and so are incomes; qualifications are at AQF Level IV and below; industries are in decline and access to financial, physical and human resources is limited (2002, p.29). By contrast, employees in the knowledge economy have high skill levels and income. They operate in the communication and finance areas with university-level qualifications and have ready access to resources (2002, p.29). The sense of inevitability and the hope of prosperity encourage a more favourable view of employment trends. While Falk and Millar question the duality, they acknowledge community attitudes that support these trends. Watson et al. (2003) also acknowledge that the shifts in the economy have produced benefits for some but they also emphasise the duality and the increasing inequality which is destroying Australian social fabric.

Other researchers in this field are not persuaded by the optimism of the new work culture and have identified the pervasive features of the knowledge economy which deflect power and control away from local sites and increasingly towards global capital forces (Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996; Jackson 2000; Farrell 2001). Black (2002) notes that jobs are being de-skilled, but the literacy bar is being raised. Work is being increasingly 'textualised', meaning it relies on written procedures, charting and recording information which excludes those with limited literacy. At the same time, workplace practices are becoming more standardised. Worker autonomy is being constrained and skill has been reduced to duplicating performance routines (Jackson 2000). While the new organisational philosophies champion 'high trust' work cultures, work on the floor enforces conformity and surveillance (Jackson 2000). Organisational literacy has emerged as an essential skill for employment.

Alcorso's study (2002) into the occupational health and safety information communicated to the migrant workforce in New South Wales led to the conclusion that workplace communication practices have not changed with the increased need for a diversity of communication modes to deal with a diversity of workers. In many workplaces the status quo remains, despite models outside industry which demonstrate effective methods for communicating with non-English speaking background (NESB) groups. Black (2002) argues that governments and industry bodies employ a deficit stance on worker literacy levels to serve their own political ends. Some stakeholders stand to gain from deflecting blame away from themselves for poverty, the elimination of jobs, capital flight, racism and sexism.

## What do we mean by literacy?

The debates briefly noted above indicate the intensely political and contested nature of literacy—a key point confirmed by Lonsdale and McCurry (2003). Sanguinetti (2001) traces the transition of literacy attached to notions of individual rights to that of instrumental and functional purposes associated with the arrival of the Australian Language and Literacy Policy in 1991. Black (2002) cites a number of ethnographic studies which demonstrate that literacy has repeatedly been used as

a lever to achieve certain social or political outcomes which have little to do with what most people think of as literacy.

Literacy has been used to manoeuvre identities—to exclude certain information from decision-making (Farrell 2001) or to change behaviour. As Payne (2000) illustrates, ‘literacy’ might be concerned with establishing middle-class values of order, timeliness and personal presentation, or it might be concerned with moulding job and course applicants into defined acceptable identities (Roberts & Sarangi 1995), or constructing new activities within the community in order to promote action in certain directions (Castleton 2000).

## Socio-cultural and ideological interpretations

These factors complicate the understandings of literacy which might apply to this study and call for understandings that far exceed the ‘barking at print’ definitions popularly understood as reading. Based on Street’s (1984, 1992) work, Black’s (2002) research differentiates between notions of literacy which are ‘autonomous’ and those which are ‘ideological’. So-called autonomous models are based upon seemingly ‘objective’ tests and surveys and purport to exist outside any particular application or context. They claim to stand alone, unaffected by values, stance or world views. By contrast, ideological models are based upon the analysis of particular social contexts. They see literacy as intrinsically tied to purpose(s) and environment(s).

Street’s (1984) analysis suggests that literacy is always ideological. He uses the term ‘ideological literacy’ as a way of highlighting these socio-political shaping processes. He is deliberate about the term *ideological*:

... because it signals quite explicitly that literacy practices are not only of ‘culture’; but also of power structures. The very emphasis on the ‘neutrality’ and ‘autonomy’ of literacy by many writers ... is ‘ideological’ in the sense of disguising this power dimension.

(Street cited in Grant 1993, p.5)

Thus Street stresses that all readers and writers carry values and assumptions with them in their engagements with texts. And texts carry their writers’ assumptions, values and positionings. Hence literacies are shaped by social and cultural factors which change over time. However, he stresses that the social and the cultural are by their very nature also political. There are always contests over ‘the meaning and use of literacy practices’ and these are ‘always embedded in power relations of some kind’ (Street 1992, p.36).

Seen from this stance, advocates of an autonomous model may be viewed in two ways. The more generous stance is to see such advocates as naive in assuming simplistic understandings of literacy as a value-neutral and context-free skill. The second, more ‘critical’ stance is to view such advocates with suspicion. The lack of willingness to acknowledge or discuss the values underpinning the literacy they promote suggests such advocates may have something to hide. A critical perspective suspects that, in such circumstances, the interests of the privileged may be riding over those of other less empowered individuals or groups.

Street’s focus on the ideology of literacy is reflected in work by others who emphasise the political and ideological nature of literacy in practice. Hence critical theorists and practitioners tend to see literacy as neither ‘neutral’ nor ‘merely technical’. Put simply, as Knoblauch noted:

No definition tells, with ontological or objective reliability, what literacy is, definitions only tell what some person or group—motivated by political commitments—wants or needs literacy to be.

(Knoblauch 1990, p.79)

Venesky uses a different metaphor to capture the same idea:

Social concepts such as literacy and poverty are integrally tied to their labels. Like jelly and sand, they are without intrinsic shape, defined and redefined by the vessels that hold them. Who is literate depends on how we define literacy.

(Venesky quoted in Allison & Brennan 1990)

Such understandings have led researchers to notions of multiple literacies. Lonsdale and McCurry (2003) align these notions of plurality with 'a broader paradigmatic shift' from 'modernity' to 'postmodernity'. They note the demise of the singular 'grand narratives' (p.5) and suggest that:

The concept of pluralistic literacies challenges longstanding assumptions that underpin State and federal approaches to language and literacy policy in Australia ... While current policies are said to reflect the latest thinking about literacy, they are underpinned by assumptions that are more commonly associated with an older model. In practice it is hard to see how these policies can simultaneously hold to an older autonomous conception of literacy and the more recent conceptions of literacy as situated practice. (Lonsdale & McCurry 2003, pp.4–5)

The notion of multiple literacies suggests that culture, context and situation shape the nature of reading and writing practices. Waterhouse (1999), for instance, discusses the different literacies aligned with seven distinctly different traditions in adult and vocational education. He argues that the literacy of the humanistic tradition is different from the literacy of the behaviourist tradition and both have different qualities from the literacy of the critical-emancipatory tradition in adult education. Such differences imply that what it means to be literate, or illiterate, will differ according to when and where we stand, and how we interpret what it means to be literate.

Gowen's (1992) research in a large southern hospital in the United States of America provides an excellent illustration. She documents how the literacy which the hospital managers wanted for their entry-level employees was one which would ensure conformity, obedience, a higher degree of formality and tighter work routines and were designed to enhance productivity and efficiency. Her research shows that management held 'a whole set of beliefs about literacy's power to transform individuals into workers who are silent, obedient, and easily controlled' (p.31).

The literacy program which evolved, based on these understandings, was not well received by the targeted employees. She notes that the managers involved (and indeed some of the teachers) did not appreciate that the supposedly 'illiterate' behaviours of their workers could be subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) forms of resistance.

Middle class workers (both Black and White) will often conclude that the employee is lacking in literacy skills ... But ... these behaviours are often forms of everyday resistance against work that is perceived as unfair ... This behaviour is actually one way for employees to claim some power and control at work. It is an understandable consequence of a work setting in which workers feel exploited. (Gowen 1992, pp.66–7)

As Gowen came to better understand the workplace context and its multiple layers of meaning, her own assumptions and understandings were challenged:

At this point in the study I begin to suspect that literacy is not really the problem at all. Indeed, of the various players in the [kitchen] drama, those who appear the least able to think critically, the least able to read the text in its broader definition, are those supervisors and managers who do not consider the possibility of employee resistance to apparently unreasonable work demands. (Gowen 1992, p.68)

As Waterhouse notes:

Literacy framed within the entrepreneurial tradition may be strong on what, when, and how worker-consumers are supposed to behave, but it may have little to say about why. (Waterhouse 1999, p.60)

However, not all accounts of literacy will recognise, acknowledge or articulate the ideological basis of their understanding. As Street, Black and others have demonstrated, community understandings of such social concepts become 'naturalised' and taken for granted, so that everyone 'knows' what literacy (or poverty, or justice) is. Hence a good deal of the writing on workplace literacy adopts simplistic understandings which position workers as deficient and blameworthy for the ills of the economy and the nation-state. Upon closer examination, such 'common sense' understandings are often found to be inadequate, misleading or unhelpful; often they conceal more than they reveal.



Fortunately, effective critiques and more insightful readings may be found in the work of Gowen (1992), O'Connor (ed. 1994), Brown (ed. 1994), Hull (1997), Gerber and Lankshear (2000), Jackson (2000), Black (2002) and others adopting a critical approach to those issues.

Since this study is grounded in particular workplace practices, only an ideological understanding of literacy will enable us to interpret and appreciate what literacy actually *means* within these contexts. Such an ideological understanding leaves space for differing definitions and multi-literacies (New London Group 1995, 1996).

## Definitions

Nevertheless, in the midst of the multiplicity, we must begin, as researchers, with some understandings (or definitions) of literacy. Hull provides a useful starting point that takes into account the political nature of the field that is grounded in experience:

To be literate in a workplace means being a master of a complex set of rules and strategies which govern who uses texts, and how, and for what purpose. [To be literate is to know] ... when to speak, when to be quiet, when to write, when to reveal what was written, and when and whether and how to respond to texts already written. (Hull 1995, p.19)

A definition such as this is based upon identity. It takes into account not only the skills of literacy and communication but also the dispositional stance and the interactional mode(s) expected within the environment. This is particularly relevant in this study where a communications audit is being conducted within organisations based on the question: 'Who am I meant to be in this particular organisation?' or 'What is competence in this job, in this organisation?'

We also found the work of Lankshear (1996, 2000) useful in framing our understandings of what it means to be literate within a workplace. Lankshear (2000) describes three dimensions of literacy:

- ✧ an operational dimension where communication tasks are fulfilled
- ✧ a cultural dimension where workers understand communication goals and modify their practices in keeping with the organisational purpose
- ✧ a critical dimension where workers evaluate the function of the communication processes and respond by suggesting improvements or resisting communication processes.

Lankshear's first, 'operational' level of literacy relates to the fulfillment of workplace tasks in a functional sense. Literacy at this level is demonstrated by completing communication tasks as required. However, to be literate, workers must also understand the purpose of their tasks. Literate workers make judgements about what should be noticed and what should be ignored, what should be emphasised, how that emphasis should be expressed, what should be omitted and so on. This, Lankshear refers to as the 'cultural' dimension of literacy. The third aspect he calls 'critical'. This is the dimension whereby the individual takes a political and creative perspective on the workplace literacy and comments on its effectiveness and its implications. Taking a more distant view of communication in action at a workplace, an individual may suggest better ways to achieve goals or may resist or extend literacy practices. The critical dimension allows the individual to assess practices, call them into question, accept, reject or modify them. It is necessary for continuous improvement and 'clever' work. Lankshear's (2000) three dimensions of literacy have been applied in this study in order to structure and deepen the analysis.

## Digital literacies and the new world(s) of print

Lankshear's work is also useful in highlighting another significant sub-theme which emerged during the course of the investigation—the steady march of literacy from page to screen. In a 1996 paper titled 'New times old ways' Lankshear notes:

Right now we are at an important literacy conjuncture. New literacy practices are emerging around new technologies which are making ever deeper incursions into everyday social practices, spanning the range from leisure to work, via communications, business, trade, etc.

These changes have major implications for literacy learning, forcing us to consider what is involved in being a text-participant, text-user, and text-analyst in 'new times'.

(Lankshear 1996, p.5)

Leu (2003) makes similar observations in the opening keynote address for the 2003 Australian Council for Adult Literacy conference. He discusses the rapidly changing nature of literacies, the 'new literacies' being created, and the transactional nature of the relationship between newly emerging literacies and information and communication technologies (ICT). He also stresses the multiplicity of literacies and the importance of the critical dimension in the context of change. The 'critical literacies', he argues, are essential for the 'richer and more complex analysis skills' needed to critique the internet and other information and communication technologies.

There is not the scope here to fully explore these changes. However, even a moment's reflection may reveal how being a text-user with a mobile telephone is changing the conventions of writing. Being a 'one finger' typist takes on totally new meaning(s) when we observe mobile telephone users rapidly tapping out SMS texts<sup>2</sup> to friends in distant places—on occasions simultaneously engaged in conversations with those present. In such texts we see traditional spelling conventions flouted, common expressions compressed into shorthand codes to reduce key strokes and symbols hijacked to new purposes and meanings.

Sutherland-Smith discusses the changes in reading brought about by the worldwide web. She cites multiple references suggesting that web literacy 'involves expanding critical reading skills to incorporate evaluation of visual and non-textual features and a greater use of associative logic' (2002, p.663).

Web text, she argues 'is different from print text reading because Web text has additional features, which means alternative reading strategies' (Sutherland-Smith 2002, p.886). The interdisciplinary interface between issues of literacy, technology and teaching/learning is substantial and growing. By way of example, Anderson and Lee (1995) discuss the use of email as a pedagogic strategy in a graduate reading class, concluding that it played a key role in developing a sense of community, while encouraging risk-taking and the sharing of ideas. Lankshear, Snyder and Green (2000) explore the implications of new literacies and technologies for schools. Lankshear and Knobel (1995) also discuss literacies, texts and difference in the context of the electronic age while Castleton and Wyatt-Smith (2003) investigate 'electronic curricula literacies' in relation to secondary school learners and their literacy achievements.

In the vocational education and training (VET) and adult education sectors, Schofield, Walsh and Melville (2000) have investigated the impact of online learning and new technologies for teachers and learners. Kearns (1997) has conducted a review of literature on 'flexible delivery', and under the auspices of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and the Flexible Learning Advisory Group (FLAG) the drive for new technologies in vocational education has spawned a range of LearnScope projects and a diverse range of virtual toolboxes. Waterhouse and Thomas-Walsh (2001) discuss the possibilities and the constraints of online learning in workplace contexts. A plethora of recent conference papers and journal articles are available on these themes, including online.

There is not the scope in this review to explore all of this research; however, they are an important context as we begin to explore literacy in workplace contexts—for there are few workplaces not being affected by new technologies one way or another.

## Literacy and training packages

In recent years we have also seen a number of researchers investigating literacy in the workplace and the introduction of training packages. In Australia a useful body of work was supported by the

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<sup>2</sup> SMS – Short Message Service is a mobile data service offered by mobile telephone service providers which allows alphanumeric messaging between mobile phones and other equipment such as voicemail systems and email.

Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC) (see McGuirk 1999; Sanguinetti 2000; Haines & Bickmore Brand 2000; Trenerry 2000; Sanguinetti & Hartley [eds] 2000; Sanguinetti & Bradshaw [eds] 2000). A comprehensive review of this literature is not possible here. It is worth noting, however, that much of this work adopted socio-cultural and ideological interpretations of literacy similar to those which underpin this study. As noted above, such understandings cannot be assumed in the wider international literature of this field.

This body of Australian research resulted in calls for greater explicitness in identifying literacy requirements in training packages from literacy practitioners—who recognise the value and potential of literacy in the workplace—and the costs (both personal and economic) of leaving it undeveloped. They argue that the value and potential of literacy development may be lost and opportunities or ‘spaces’ for literacy learning are not created unless literacy requirements are spelled out in training packages. Much of this discussion revolves around notions of whether literacy should be ‘built-in’ or ‘bolted-on’ to vocational education and training packages (Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin [eds] 1994; Wignall 1998). Sanguinetti and Hartley (eds 2000) for instance, report:

The ‘built-in’ approach to the inclusion of literacy and numeracy within industry standards brings with it a risk that in the struggle to implement training packages (and by the imperative to train and assess workers as quickly and efficiently as possible), literacy and numeracy needs will be over-shadowed. The ‘built-in’ approach does not provide leverage for negotiating time and resources for training and support in literacy and numeracy. The recommendations in this report point out the need to explore ways of making underpinning literacy and competencies more visible and more explicit in the endorsed components of training packages. (Sanguinetti & Hartley [eds] 2000, p.3)

Not surprisingly, the body of research conducted by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium also highlighted significant issues of definition in the context of training packages, with some interpretations based on narrow, reductionist and minimalist notions of literacy for specific purposes, and other notions of literacy aligned with broad communication, problem-solving and critical thinking skills for family and community life beyond the world of work. The same suite of studies also identified significant funding and policy issues, concerns about resources and materials to support learning, and essential professional development needs for teachers and trainers (Sanguinetti & Hartley [eds] 2000).

While these issues are not new and date back at least to the early days of the national training reform agenda (Gribble 1990; Carmichael 1990) the research undertaken by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium also identified continuing tensions and debates. As Paton (2000) notes, even where employers acknowledge the importance of literacy and numeracy skills for a productive workforce, the debate continues about who is responsible for the development of such skills.

Despite the continuing debate about who pays, the educational conundrum remains. Even if such skills are universally recognised as necessary, their inclusion in training packages remains problematic.<sup>3</sup> National training packages are necessarily general. An ‘autonomous’ interpretation of literacy tends to assume that the literacy requirements of workplaces can be identified, quantified and codified in relatively simple ways. Such understandings see literacy as a ‘stand alone’ capacity unrelated to purpose, culture or context. Hence there is an expectation that designers ought to be able to identify and ‘write-in’ to training packages everything that needs to be addressed, and that such literacy competencies should be amenable to direct instruction and assessment strategies. However, such a view is too simplistic and tends not to reflect the reality experienced by teachers, trainers, workers, learners and individuals in their settings (workplace or otherwise).

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<sup>3</sup> The ANTA high-level review of training packages was being conducted over three phases during 2003 and early 2004, at the time when this project was nearing completion. Literacy and numeracy has been one of the issues raised in the course of this review.

When we recognise that what 'counts' as being fully and appropriately literate in a given context is determined by that context, including its cultural and political dimensions, then it becomes clear that the notion of a singular, external literacy will always be problematic. We come to understand that the design and development process for workplace literacy and learning is inevitably an interpretive one. We have to work out what the appropriate literacy is for a given context, or to put this another way, we need to determine what literacy *means* in a given context. *Furthermore this needs to be done every time, in each context.*

From a public policy perspective the VET system is left with significant challenges. The audit requirements on literacy within the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) serve to highlight literacy issues and make explicit the responsibilities of training providers. However, neither the framework nor national training packages can specify, in any meaningful way, precisely what is to be done to make literacy explicit in each context or circumstance. However, if they are well designed, training packages can provide guidance, direction and useful models to support practitioners working in the literacy area in workplaces and in vocational education. By highlighting to practitioners the sorts of questions to be asked and the factors to be considered (not 'delivered'), training packages can help VET practitioners and their learners to better understanding about the importance and place of literacies in the workplace and in learning.

The process of 'integrating' literacy effectively in workplace training is not merely one of importation, bringing 'literacy' from the outside into the training context; rather, it is a process of recognition, exposition, interpretation and development. Ultimately, as Waterhouse (2000) notes:

The real value and impact of Training Packages will be determined, not so much by what they specify, include, or leave out. Their true value will be determined by the ways educators, and the other stakeholders involved, choose to use them. For the most part it is up to the educators to take the lead and show what might be possible. Like any document, a Training Package can be read in multiple ways ... the required shift [entails] a move from 'a focus on predetermined content for delivery towards 'dialogue with the stakeholders on design for effective learning' ... The Packages specify endpoints, in terms of endorsed competencies and standards, but they do not specify educational methods, or the multiple ways the goals may be reached. The Packages can be read as creating the space for innovative educators to explore and colonise. (Waterhouse 2000, p.28)

Others have agreed on the importance and the potential of the roles to be taken up by teachers and trainers in relation to training packages. However, in doing so, they have consistently highlighted the professional development needs of the field. Most notably and most recently, Down (2002) conducted a substantial review of the impact of the introduction of training packages. She reports on a critical need for educational leadership and professional development at all levels of the system. She recommends that:

... the National Training Quality Council places a high priority for professional development programs which will assist teachers and trainers within RTOs [registered training organisations] to implement Training Packages effectively. Such professional development should focus on enhancing the capability of teachers and trainers to unpack and repack Training Packages in order to develop programs which are both pedagogically sound and which enable the effective development and recognition of workplace competences both within educational institutions and in the workplace.

... The support for professional development, especially for those implementing Training Packages at the provider or industry enterprise level, is critical. Training Packages can only be used effectively when their planning and implementation involves teachers and trainers with the necessary educational skills to:

- ✧ plan effective learning pathways
- ✧ customise and contextualise programs to reflect the learning context in which the learning occurs and for which it is intended
- ✧ integrate on-the-job and of-the-job learning

- ✧ facilitate learning through work in both real and simulated situations
- ✧ encourage systematic group and individual reflection on experience
- ✧ innovate with learning modes and methods to enhance the learning and teaching process
- ✧ administer the learning process to ensure accurate records can be kept without straight-lining the learning process. (Down 2002, p.91)

## Generic skills, aptitudes and employability

In recent times there has also been a renewed interest in issues of generic skills and their place in the vocational domain. Generic skills, variously referred to as ‘soft-skills’, ‘key competencies’ (Mayer 1992), ‘core competencies’, ‘essential skills’, ‘employability skills’ and so on, are well and truly on the agenda for VET policy-makers, not only in Australia but also internationally (see for instance, Kearns 2001; DeSeCo Project 2002; Turner 2002). The literature has blossomed to an extent that it cannot be effectively captured in this review. For a useful overview of recent research on these issues see Kearns (2001), the suite of recent NCVER projects on generic skills, including the book of readings (Gibb 2004) and the study conducted jointly by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA) in 2002.

Key themes which emerge from this literature include:

- ✧ the importance placed upon communication, problem-solving and team-working skills
- ✧ the place of literacy, numeracy and information technology skills as ‘foundational’ or fundamental building blocks for further learning
- ✧ the importance of work and community and family life for the development of these capacities over the lifespan
- ✧ concerns about ways to assess, quantify and/or certify these capacities
- ✧ the increasing expectation for lifelong learning and re-education/training
- ✧ the increasing importance of a range of personal attributes associated with optimum employability.

The discussions surrounding generic skills, which are related to those of the literacy debates, are also complex and contested. Like the literacy debates, the generic skills discussions are characterised by different understandings of generic skills, within ‘autonomous’ or ‘ideological’ frames of reference. Virgona et al. (2003) identify two distinct but related perspectives on generic skills—a practitioner discourse and a policy discourse. National training packages and their implementation straddle both of these perspectives, which in some ways are in tension with one another. As Stevenson has pointed out:

Taken together, the studies ... indicate that, even in the case of key competencies, it is problematic to conceptualise these competencies, once operationalised in specific contexts, as value free or generic. Their expression and their meaningfulness to individual workers and their workplaces are highly situated ... Thus while it may be possible conceptually to abstract a generic label for a set of site-specific capacities with superficial similarities (e.g. numeracy, literacy, problem solving, use of technology), at this level such entities are not the concrete or functional capacities that individuals actually use. They are meaningful only at a distance. (Stevenson 1996, pp.2–3)

Virgona et al. highlight the significance of this distinction:

The distinction between the abstract conceptualisation which makes sense only at a distance and the actual ‘functional capacities’ utilised on the job is important. The former abstraction is the generic competence as it is understood by policy-makers and the latter is that which must be appreciated by VET practitioners. Within the discourse of policy-makers the term ‘generic skills’ suggests a necessarily abstract and de-contextualised set of capacities ... By

contrast ... Practitioners tend to emphasise the holistic nature of those skills and the teaching and learning processes that facilitate their development. They are interested in these skills in context, as they are manifested, meaningful and relevant in their students' lives ... Thus, even when using the same label, VET policy-makers and practitioners may be talking about quite different constructions or conceptions. (Virgona et al. 2003, p.14)

Hull makes a similar observation when she notes:

These skills that workers need but do not possess are sometimes determined by experts on blue ribbon panels ... and they are sometimes based on opinion surveys of employers and round table discussions of business executives and educational experts ... But startlingly, such judgements are almost never informed by observations of work, particularly observations which incorporate the understandings of workers. Instead skills are listed as abstract competencies and represented as context free and universal ... Bundled with the notion of skills are notions of generality and neutral technique. We think of reading or writing as generic, the intellectual equivalent of all-purpose flour, and we believe that, once mastered, these skills can and will be used in any context for any purpose. (Hull 1997, p.17)

One of the key challenges with generic skills then, like that of literacy, is to work out what these skills, attributes or capacities mean in any given context, and determine how they can best be fostered and developed. Once again there are skills of recognition, interpretation and construction involved—skills which are best exercised in dialogue or collaboration with the stakeholders involved in each context.

## Competence and the transfer of skills

We turn now to the third of our core themes, that of transferability. The approach we have taken to literacies and generic skills opens up important areas of investigation here which more mechanistic notions of competence have avoided. Although competency-based training was said to address skill, knowledge and attitude, most industry competencies confine themselves to performance skills and immediately functional knowledge expressed by individuals, often in isolation from the workplace.

The Assessment and Workplace Training Package, for instance, demands that assessment judgements be conducted by 'objective' outsiders who will assess individual employees by applying an 'objective' assessment tool. Such constructions of competence are based on 'scientific' models (Sandberg 2000). They are aligned with the 'autonomous' understandings of literacy and skill discussed above. Such understandings have masked, or failed to reveal, some major features which influence competence and the so-called transferability of skills. In particular, the importance of informal learning and the role of 'communities of practice' (Lave 1990; Lave & Wenger 1991) have been largely unrecognised until recently. Both of these situate knowledge and practice as social phenomena which are constructed within the workplace through collective processes and engagements.

## Collective and social competence

While the space is not available to fully explore these issues, it is worth noting the oddity of conceptualising skills, particularly 'generic skills' such as communication, teamwork and relationship skills, as individual competencies. These 'skills' are clearly social in nature. They are acquired, developed and demonstrated through engagement with others, in interactive social processes. On the whole, they grow through practice, through 'doing' with other people. Darrah (1994), for instance, has shown, through ethnographic investigations of work in practice, how groups of workers are able to complete tasks in which they appear not to possess skills. The competence rests within the collective—the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

While individuals may develop the capacity to exercise these skills and may have the potential to learn and develop them, it is, arguably, not appropriate to conceptualise such skills as possessed by

individuals. While commonly thought of as generic and inherently transferable, these skills are in many ways contingent, dependent upon context and circumstances to enable their development and demonstration. As Glynda Hull explains:

It may be that if we study the workplace to see how literacy learning occurs 'naturally', in the absence of formal instruction provided through literacy programs, we may see something similar to this kind of participant structure. We might also find distributed literacy knowledge, where workers typically carry out certain tasks which involve literacy in collaboration with each other, with one person supplying one kind of knowledge and others, different proficiencies. (Hull 1997, p.25)

Exploration of the full potential and the implications of taking seriously notions of social and collective competence is beyond the scope of this review. However, such ideas are pertinent to this study. When work and work skills are conceived entirely in individual terms, it is easy to assume any deficiencies, including those in systems and economies, are also those of individuals. It is then a relatively small step to assume that the training and development needs of casual and contingent workers rest entirely with casual and contingent workers.

Such attribution of responsibility—and blame for the system's failures—is indefensible in terms of principles of access, equity and social justice. It would also fly in the face of what we now know about the nature of learning organisations (Senge 1991; Sefton, Waterhouse & Cooney 1995; Billett 2001), communities of practice (Lave 1990; Lave & Wenger 1991) and socially situated and collective competence (Virgona, Waterhouse & Sefton 1998).

## New approaches to thinking about transferability

We also note that the transfer of learning and knowledge is commonly understood as an individual challenge which is managed autonomously and accomplished informally. Casual and transient workers offer the expertise of their transferable skills as the central features of their competence. This study is therefore concerned to understand the processes of transfer more adequately. Our study on generic skills concluded that transfer is poorly understood in the work community (Virgona et al. 2003). It is presumed to be inherent in particular skills—for example, a motor mechanic can work on any car; an experienced waitress can apply her skills in any restaurant or hospitality context. In addition, transfer is seen to be somewhat automatic and easily replicated. In this study we adopted Down's (2001) metaphor of packing and unpacking skills in response to particular workplace requirements, a process which entails reflection, analysis, recognition, interpretation and adaptation. The transfer of skills is a learning and adaptive process directed towards the demonstration of competence contextualised within particular worksites. Hence an understanding of workplace learning and competence is pivotal.

Recent thinking about communities of practice and the extensive research of analysts such as Billett demonstrate that informal learning is facilitated by workplace structures which offer workers opportunities to share problem-solving, workplace knowledge and rationales for undertaking tasks. Learning is a process embedded in the social, cultural and political nature of the workplace. The agency of the individual is significant, particularly his/her relational skills and learning motivation (Billett 2001). However, the way workplaces envisage knowledge and structure opportunities is imperative, both in workplace learning and in the transfer—or re-application, of skills and knowledge.

For Hager (2001) the essence of competence is encapsulated in the capacity for 'judgement' which he encases in what he calls the 'emerging paradigm' of learning and knowledge. Hager contrasts the emergent paradigm with the 'standard paradigm' which is based upon the accumulation of knowledge, the rejection of informal knowledge and situated learning, and the preference for abstract learning and pencil-and-paper tests to demonstrate knowledge. The emerging paradigm for learning which he discusses also fits with Hull's definition cited above. It embraces ideas of fluency in workplace discourse and a rich appreciation of context(s) and purpose(s). Judgement is the quintessential behaviour whereby employees demonstrate their competence. Through judgement in real work situations, they enact the skills, knowledge and dispositional behaviour appropriate to the

situation. Judgement also implies an understanding of ambiguity and productivity. The emerging paradigm demands comprehensive understandings of dynamic work environments which are shaped by workplace cultural practices and gleaned informally in the workplace.

Hager's work gives particular prominence to dispositional knowledge. Judgement is not a skill which sits outside values and culture but is strongly linked to communities of practice, and to membership, values, belonging and identity in those communities. It therefore contradicts the standard model which upholds objectivity and universal application. Hager's understanding links with Gonzi's statement 'Learning to do is part of learning to become' (2002, p.12).

Such understandings cause us to rethink notions of dispositional knowledge which have been recently defined and valorised by the employer-led generic skills debate (Curtis & McKenzie 2001). Where the generic skills debate is preoccupied with listing skills and qualities to measure and define, Hager captures the full field within the single notion of judgement where intellectual and attitudinal skills come to the fore.

Sandberg's (2000) research demonstrates a notion of competence which is not dissimilar. He recognises competence as the way individuals construct an understanding of their work. He rejects the view that meaningful studies of work can be conducted without taking into account the way workers understand, experience and relate to their work:

The most central finding ... is that human competence is not primarily constituted by a specific set of attributes. Instead, workers' knowledge, skills and other attributes used in accomplishing the work are preceded by and based upon the workers' understanding of the work. (Sandberg 2000, p.54)

The workers' competence, he explains, derives from their relationship with their work and the way they experience, conceptualise and enact it. Competence does not come down to the 'attributes' they bring to the work, but the way they interpret and construct a meaning for themselves about what it is they have to do. There are those who replicate workplace activity, and demonstrate a competent execution of the elements. Truly competent workers understand purposes and relational factors, which allows them to identify and articulate problems and adjust their activities in the light of new input.

Hager's, Billett's and Sandberg's work is useful in understanding the transfer of learning because of their analysis and appreciation of informal learning. Since the transfer of skills is almost inevitably left to the individual, and is rarely the focus of deliberate instruction, the dynamics of informal learning are intrinsic to this study.

The desire for a more complete understanding of skills acquisition and the interest in lifelong learning have given new prominence to informal learning (Billett 1994, 2001; Stevenson [ed.] 1994, 1996; Robinson & Arthy 1999; Hager 2001). Down's work (2001, 2002) is also pertinent. Her analysis of the processes of skills transfer differentiates between levels of skills understanding (2002). She explains that it is the perception of difference which provokes an individual to question workplace practices in the process of resolving queries. Questioning encourages lateral and innovative thinking in keeping with emergent learning models. Similarities, on the other hand, encourage patterning and linear thinking and hence a more superficial understanding of workplace processes. Transfer is active and learning-based rather than passive.

The transfer we expect to encounter in this project can be described as 'near' transfer (Misko 1999). Near transfer relates to comparatively small leaps in linking knowledge. Misko gives the example of learning to drive a truck when you already know how to drive a car. Far transfer, however, might involve transfer of an intellectual process from one environment to another. She uses the example of learning precision from mathematics education and transferring this to checking alternative designs in bridge construction.



Nevertheless, depth of understanding is important in facilitating the re-application of skills and processes. This leads us to suggest that workplace induction and knowledge-sharing processes are important in assisting in the transfer of skills from one workplace to another.

## Summary

This study was relatively small scale in nature and limited in scope and duration. While this review does not capture all, it nevertheless draws upon a substantial body of interdisciplinary studies. The study embraces a socio-cultural view of literacy which is necessarily ideological in the sense that it recognises literacy and workplace practices as shaped by power relations of various kinds. What 'counts' as being literate depends on who you ask and on their particular interests and concerns. There will inevitably be different points of view on these issues and hence the associated debates—including those on issues of definition and assessment—may be expected to move forward in various ways but are unlikely to be resolved. Our focus on literacies for the workplace is further situated within an awareness of the changing nature and patterns of work and employment and the tensions and challenges these changes create.

# Methods of the study

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## Reference group

This project was guided by a reference group which met on two occasions (with some members participating via teleconference and email). Members provided advice and guidance to the researchers, including on the research methods, and reviewed the draft reports offering constructive critical comment. Membership of the reference committee is listed in appendix A.

## Conducting the project

### Research design

The research design required that data were gathered from several sources:

- ✧ from recruitment/placement agencies and/or labour hire companies
- ✧ from registered training organisations (RTOs) involved in training
- ✧ from workplaces.

The two industries involved in this study were selected for somewhat different reasons. Aged care was of interest because of the great deal of change which the industry has experienced. It has struggled to embrace new accountability requirements while many staff still identified with a philosophy where ‘a warm heart and capable hands’ was the measure of competence. Given that the industry is widely characterised by a more professional approach and one which is text-based, aged care promised to provide a rich field of research.

Call centres were selected because they present themselves as part of the globalised, competitive, customer-conscious business world. They have been seen as an archetypal new business which encompasses most features of fast capitalism (Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996). What seems to be a natural corollary is that they employ a large number of casuals at certificate III level and below. Since communication is their business they offered a rich resource for investigating the literacies of the new world of work.

The project was designed to take a vertical slice within each of the industries in order to observe the way the sectors dealt with literacy and the transferability issues. We planned to visit at least one recruitment agency and registered training organisation and several workplaces. The focus of our attention was on those contingent employees operating at or below certificate III level. In aged care facilities they were the personal care attendants, and in call centres they were the operators who worked on the phones.

The design included a ‘communication audit’ where data were to be gathered on the literacies of the workplace. Supervisors and management would be approached to discuss the way in which communication standards were established and maintained, and the way in which literacy competence was evident in employees. Following the audit, employees would be interviewed.

## Data gathering

The principal means of data gathering was through interviews and participant observation in the tradition of ethnographic research. The management of the organisations studied suggested recruits/employees for in-depth interviews on the basis of their perceived literacy needs and/or casual employees with ‘something to say’. Others were approached by the researchers on hearsay advice or observed interest. The sampling could be described as purposeful as discussed by Caulley (1994, p.6).

As relationships become more established, the researcher, with the assistance of supervisory staff, identified people who met the criteria for more intense interviewing. These criteria required that at least two of the following three be met:

- ✧ employment arrangements can be described as contingent or itinerant
- ✧ workers trained or untrained working at AQF levels I–III
- ✧ workers perceived to have low literacy and/or English language.

In all, 19 interviews were conducted with interviewees, in the above categories, investigating issues of:

- ✧ workplace change, particularly communication change
- ✧ the impact of change upon the individual and their work
- ✧ the transfer of skills and knowledge across sites
- ✧ coping strategies.

A more detailed exposition of the interview questions and the research method is provided in appendix B.

When it came to investigating the call centres the data-gathering process did not proceed according to plan. Call centres proved to be somewhat closed organisations and access for outsiders was extremely restricted. The management personnel were rarely available and unwilling to provide open access for data gathering. They were also unwilling to release workers to be interviewed. Hence arrangements were made to meet outside work times. As a result, employees were interviewed from a range of work sites, including those from the organisations where we conducted the audit.

The original project design specified that data would be gathered at the institution/company level to contribute towards a communications audit for each organisation as we followed the chain of labour management—from hiring through training to production. In practice, the ‘chain of labour management’ was found to be less linear. Various roles overlapped and amalgamated. Many call centres, for instance, do their own hiring and training; others involve partnerships with service providers.

In all, 41 in-depth interviews were conducted: 22 with supervisory, management and training staff and 19 with casual and contingent workers. Data were gathered from four aged care facilities, two call centres, four training providers and three labour-hire placement agencies.

## Data analysis

Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The audio tapes and transcript data, along with field notes and other workplace documents and artefacts were analysed for key issues and themes. Themes were uncovered in the light of the literature review and the leads offered by academic writers, researchers and reference group members. We read extensively in the areas of literacy, new workplace practices, learning and the transfer of skills and built upon previous work on generic skills (Virgona et al. 2003).

The approach here was consistent with what Caulley (1994), drawing upon Lincoln and Guba (1989), describes as inductive data analysis. There was no ‘a priori’ theory to test with pre-determined

variables to structure data gathering and analysis. Rather, as Lincoln and Guba put it, there was a process of ‘making sense’ of the raw data gathered in the field:

Data in the field must be analysed inductively (that is, from specific, raw units of information to be put in categories of information) in order to suggest local working hypotheses or questions that can be followed up. (Lincoln & Guba 1985, pp.202–3)

Comparisons were made between organisations, and between the different industry sectors, in order to understand the role of proceduralisation—the standardising of workplace practice—the nature of the literacies being enacted in the workplace, the extent of applicable transfer and the varying levels of support available to those with literacy and communication needs. Lankshear’s (2002) three-dimensional conception of literacy provided a useful framework for considering the nature of the literacy practices encountered. The key themes which emerged were related to proceduralisation and its role in determining competence and communication requirements; workplace views of competence and communication demands; establishing and sustaining workplace standards; understandings of transferability and employability; learning and the role of training and training packages; casual employment and its uses and its restrictions.

## A qualitative study

From the outset this investigation was framed as a qualitative or naturalistic study. Given what we already knew about workplace literacies, we expected to find considerable variation between sites and situations and we therefore rejected a questionnaire-based approach to data gathering. For this work the principal research tool could be said to be the researcher him/herself:

Only the human instrument in contrast to the usual pencil-and-paper instrument, has the characteristics to deal with the complexity of human phenomena. These characteristics taken from Guba and Lincoln (1981) include:

- ✧ responsiveness ...
- ✧ adaptability ...
- ✧ holistic characteristics ...
- ✧ knowledge beyond the stated ...
- ✧ processual immediacy ...
- ✧ opportunities for clarification and summarisation ...
- ✧ opportunities to explore atypical or idiosyncratic responses ... (Caulley 1994, p.5)

This key principle, the researcher as the principal research ‘instrument’, is well established in the literature for qualitative research, and was identified in the original research proposal for this study. It highlights the need for sensitivity, skill and understanding on the part of the researchers conducting the field work. The principal researchers in this case have many years experience as practitioners, researchers and consultants in adult literacy and workplace literacy, language and communication programs.

# Results

The findings of this study are divided into two sections. The first involves a discussion exploring the literacies of the industries—how operators come to know what they are and how they perform within them. While this section is quite extended, it establishes the context and the complex interplay of factors which shape literacy in the two industries. This section draws upon the data gathered from the audits conducted at worksites, training organisations and recruitment agencies to answer the first research question: *What are the multiple literacies of aged care and call centre industries?* It does so by using Lankshear's (2000) framework of the three dimensions of literacy—the operational, the cultural and the critical. This framework complements the definition of literacy utilised by this study. This section begins by discussing the operational and cultural literacies of each of the industries and then takes a general perspective on the third dimension—critical literacy.

Having established the literacies required of the workforce in these industries, the report moves on to the remaining research questions.

A significant finding revealed early in the project was that the casual workforce we encountered is far less transient than we originally predicted. The research questions were framed around an understanding, drawn from our preliminary reading, that many contingent employees make up their working week through a mixture of days and hours in a variety of workplaces. While this may be true in some instances, our experience within the aged care and call centre industries does not substantiate this observation. The contingent employees we encountered worked regularly or irregularly at one or two workplaces, although an individual's cumulative experience of work venues could exceed ten workplaces.

At the beginning of each section a text box summarises the material which follows.

## Operational and cultural literacies of aged care

*Research question 1: What are the multiple literacies of aged care industries?*

The literate personal care attendant:

- ♦ understands her function within the funding and care structure of the facility
- ♦ accurately reports the dependency levels of residents, understanding the implications for above
- ♦ is fully alert as to what is reportable and what is irrelevant.

Aged care literacies are shaped by industry standards reflected in the accreditation and funding documents. These documents mandate best practice principles by setting out the auditable standards.

The principles are based on a reading of community values which constitute the lifestyle expectations of 'a contented old person'.

The principles, mandated in the accreditation texts, have come to define:

- ♦ how care should be delivered
- ♦ how care relationships should be conducted.

Workplace documentation must provide evidence of compliance to these principles.

The documentation is read widely by a range of professionals which influences the way it is written. The language has become medicalised and formal.

Hence, literate personal care assistants shape their language, their behaviour, what they see and what they report, on the basis of 'best practice models' prescribed by the industry.

The aged care industry is regulated by an accreditation system which includes 44 standards audited by government. This initiative has revolutionised the industry, ridding it of a number of shameful and dehumanising practices in some facilities. At the same time it has put in place highly regulated procedures which, although contested, have served the industry well by allowing relatively lowly trained staff to broaden their scope of work, thereby reducing the cost and the staffing shortfall within the nursing profession. However, these strategies have also shaped the literacies of the industry, introducing new ones and eliminating others.

The literacies of the aged care industry are described below, and given that literacies are highly contextualised, considerable space is devoted to explaining the dynamics of the industry and the role and cultural context of care workers.

This research is directed towards those working at AQF Level III and below. In aged care this means the work of personal care attendants. Within the cost-conscious public health service, personal care assistants have largely replaced the professionals in aged care facilities. Hence these workers carry a sizeable responsibility for decisions about correct nursing care and the level of government funding offered to the facility.

Facilities are funded on the basis of need, so, as clients become increasingly incapacitated, more support services may be made available upon application to the government. Personal care assistants notice, report and document the condition of clients; hence, they determine the level of funding available to the facility. The documentation is highly systematised and utilises proformas, procedures and codes. Some disabilities and conditions attract more funding than others. Thus the perceptions of the personal care attendants have become attuned and refined to the wellbeing of the clients, as well as the broader wellbeing of the organisation.

The funding arrangements require personal care attendants to pass judgement on a number of physical and social conditions of aged clients, including their behaviour and emotional wellbeing. Funding formulas have highlighted certain behaviours. Clients who are found to be 'manipulative', 'attention seeking' or 'withdrawn' attract funds to enable staff to deal with this behaviour. In the past drugs may have been liberally dispensed to deal with troublesome clients; however, the current practice is to 'manage the behaviour' through interventions. Based on values of what the industry has decided constitutes a 'contented old person', deviations from the norm are treated. Creative and social activities are offered by the diversional therapist, mood-altering music by the music therapist or conversational interaction is offered by personal care attendants or volunteers.<sup>4</sup> An appropriately literate personal care attendant therefore perceives these difficulties, names them in terms offered by the standards formulation and records them in such a way that a case can be mounted to attract the funds necessary to support the planned interventions:

... through training ... the worker knows how to play the game. This is what industry would like, that we educate the worker ... around this observation thing so that they can communicate the information in a language that catalysts [sic] the dollars. (Aged care trainer)

Symptomatic behaviour may be difficult to recognise and calls for a wide range of experience and knowledge:

It can just be the sideways remark, the grimace, the this, the that ... 'it's not just what I say, it's what I do, it's how I get up, how I ease myself down, it's the things I do or don't eat ... it's not just that I'm not hungry that day so take my plate away'. You have to start looking at ... 'do I have a problem with my teeth, do I have a mouth ulcer ... am I depressed? What's contributing to the fact that I didn't eat?'. We are asking so much of these carers. They have to be psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, you name it. (Personal care attendant trainer)

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<sup>4</sup> These judgements are culturally subjective. In Anglo culture, independence is highly valued, but in some cultures old people embrace their right to be dependent. Younger members of the community show respect for age by attending to the needs of the elderly. The industry, however, has little sympathy for capable residents who want to be waited upon.

A culturally literate personal care attendant can therefore determine *what* should be written and *how* it should be written to maximise funding and satisfy the accreditation demands:

We get the dollars and the dollars dictates the care, not the care dictates the dollars, it's reversed the process.  
(Aged care manager)

The reports generated have a wide readership. In the past, notes might have been made for internal use, but now records are viewed by doctors and other health professionals along with auditors, and in some instances, legal professionals. This readership has contributed to the shaping of the language and the content of the reports. Interviewees admitted to considerable anxiety about presenting themselves as learned in their documentation. They struggled to sound credible and authoritative, hence the language of reports has become more medicalised. Words such as 'cerebral', 'self-initiated' and 'cognitive' have replaced more commonplace words. Workplace practice has established a principle of avoiding using the first person in residents' records. One informant explained:

Say you were looking after somebody's skin, and instead of saying 'sorbolene is applied', you would say something like 'to maintain skin integrity' ... You just slip those little things in. There is a language in this, and I have only been back in aged care for five years, and it's really taken me a long time to feel okay. Now I've got it ... So it's really fine tuning, putting all those little details so that it means something in the overall assessment. Like you wouldn't just say 'I took, say Alice, to the toilet'. You'd say that you directed her to the toilet, assisted her with her clothing adjustment, helped her with her hygiene, and then escorted her to wherever she wanted to go.  
(Aged care worker)

The literacy practices required of personal care attendants permeate the quality of relationships and interactions between carers and clients. The accreditation document dictates that clients must be treated with respect. This has been an important lever for change in the industry and has outlawed some practices which previously created intolerable conditions for aged residents. However, it has shifted the focus onto compliance. This has been interpreted within the industry as a ban on terms of endearment previously very common in the industry. 'Loves' and 'sweeties' and 'darls' were heard daily and clients and carers hugged and kissed with relative freedom and lack of self-consciousness. In the name of client respect, residents these days are addressed by their given names and variations are negotiated very carefully before such liberties are taken. Touching is watchfully constrained.

While the accreditation document is not proscriptive on this practice, auditors and industry spokespersons have established a method of reading the accreditation document which they enforce in the industry with the use of a common language. Hence there are consistent understandings of what practices constitute respect, dignity and privacy. As one director of nursing stated, 'You don't have any autonomy in interpreting the accreditation document. It's black and white, it's very black and white and you've got a voice on the end of the phone if you are not quite sure'.

Many interviewees found this intrusion into their practice something of an affront. They believed their expertise in personal relationships to be exceptional and one of the professional skills they brought to the job. Furthermore, they argued that a middle-class Anglo-Saxon interpretation of relationships was overbearing, inappropriate and not in the best interests of all clients. They claimed to have always placed a high value on the care relationship; some felt that their capacity to form genuine relationships with clients had been jeopardised by a new regime which brought with it a moralistic perspective which has been interpreted in restricted and narrow terms. The challenge to the discourse arises partly from a sense that professionals who used to be recognised as authorities at the local level have been sidelined, and a common language has been superimposed on the industry which overrides their judgement on what matters. There has been a dramatic shift in who identifies the important issues, who sets the priorities and how competence is understood and managed. Power and authority has been shifted from the local experts to the centralised regulators.

Orthodoxies have been established based upon a reading of the regulatory documents which fix values and relationships between carers and clients. The reading has set what should be said, how it should be said, what should be observed, what and how it should be recorded and how

communication is to be conducted within the industry. This is the literacy that the competent personal care attendant needs to master whether casually or permanently employed.

## Operational and cultural literacies of call centres

*Research question 1: What are the multiple literacies of call centre industries?*

The literacies of call centres are based upon internally determined quality principles.

Quality principles are shaped by global competition and productivity pressures.

Productivity is measured by time: how many calls taken per hour, how much time is taken off line and the achievement of outcomes for example, sales, completed surveys ...

Micro-management technology has provided the tools to refine practices and to achieve production goals faster and more efficiently.

The literacies of a credit management centre are concentrated on the task of establishing agreement for the payment of outstanding accounts in as short a time as possible, yet still maintaining a positive image for the company. Operators need to:

- ♦ be seen to be giving people a 'fair go' despite different social, ethnic and political communities
- ♦ take control of the call using a 'warranting tone' (Potter & Wetherall 1987)
- ♦ establish rapport based on middle-class values
- ♦ maintain financial returns
- ♦ manage the screens and record information meeting workplace standards.

Call centres within this study promote a strong culture based on an image of youth, dynamism, innovation and technological advancement. Language used to describe the work is cultivated to reflect this image.

Literate call centre operators:

- ♦ are fluent in their use of language that inspires cooperation as well as the jargon
- ♦ adopt a synthetic persona to detach themselves from emotional investment
- ♦ present themselves as dispassionate, fair-minded and mainstream
- ♦ promote the branding of the organisation.

Recruiters seek good oral literacies rather than written literacies. Literacies have been particularised to the industry applications which dictate:

- ♦ ways of interacting
- ♦ ways of recording information with both texts and numbers.

Call centres are a fast-growing industry. Some reports (Ratwani 2003) profess that 70% of company contacts takes place through call centres. There were 1000 centres employing 60 000 people in Australia in 1999 (Johnson 1999). According to callcentres.net, there are currently 3850 call centres in Australia with five or more seats working in a structured environment. They are one of the largest employers of casual labour and represent an array of businesses and business practices spanning those described as 'the new sweatshops' and those which identify themselves as highly professional with strong bona fides and business practices. The latter were the organisations involved in this study.

Call centres are strongly influenced by global competition. In a commercial environment where call centres can be established anywhere in the world, competitive through-put and quality standards need at least to be maintained, if not surpassed if the business is to remain in Australia.

Productivity is measured by the speedy achievement of specified goals, such as the number of calls, sales or completed surveys. In the interest of continued customer loyalty, centres also require that customers feel positive about their telephone interchange, regardless of its purpose.

The industry response to these pressures has been to develop technology which facilitates the micro-management of outcomes. Micro-management means that workplace activity is managed by the second, taking into account time spent on each call, cumulative time spent on the phones, outcomes achieved for each call, time taken to achieve outcomes. Technology is available which can trace who answered what call months, maybe even years ago. The technology can observe and



record the number of key strokes, per operator, per minute, although the centres involved in this study did not use this facility.

In one call centre only 4% of the working day was allowed off line, a ratio confirmed as typical by other centre managers. This included time spent on toilet breaks, getting a drink and even interacting with the supervisor unless granted permission to be unavailable. Operators are required to reach targets which specify the minimum number of calls per hour, with constant pressure to increase the number. At one call centre, supervisors and trainers worked on reducing calls from 18 seconds to 15 seconds where operators were responding to routine information requests. At another, the address of the caller appeared on the screen when they rang in. Seconds were saved if the operator read out the address and had the caller verify the information rather than asking the caller to give their address. A constant queue of calls allows minimum breaks between customers. Trainers and supervisors critically analyse call operator behaviour in an attempt to trim micro-seconds from calls.

Hence literacies of call centres are fixed upon maximising output by achieving the task in minimal time and by providing a quick succession of calls while maintaining customer satisfaction.

### Literacies of a credit management centre

At the credit management centre, cultural mastery of the literacy meant that operators needed to internalise their role as debt collectors rather than customer service consultants. A 'customer service' approach requires the operator to understand the callers' needs and maximise opportunities to meet them through the sale of extra services. Debt collection, however, is not a service offering extras. The intention is to make arrangements for the payment of the services already used as quickly as possible, and to move on to the next customer.

The task and its purpose therefore define the literacies. But these are subtle and highly interactive. Effective credit management operators are able to 'take control of the call' which implies a capacity to establish authority and leadership without the assistance of body language and other contextual cues. The operator seeks to establish a level of rapport whereby customers feel compelled to respect the terms of the agreement. Added to this, at the end of the call, they should still hold the company in high esteem. Fixed scripts were rejected by the credit management company some time ago because they diminished the sense of authenticity and personal integrity in the relationship between operator and caller. Rapport is therefore highly valued; what is more, dissatisfied customers may submit a formal complaint. Operators expressed some anxiety about complaints 'because it remains on your record for life regardless of whether it was fair or not'.

In a centre such as this, callers tend to begin with a long story explaining why their circumstances warrant particular leniency. The operator has to convey a willingness to listen and give a fair hearing but, at the same time, she has to curtail the customer's story to drive the conversation to a commitment to establish a payment arrangement. Operators are allowed some options in negotiating the payment deadlines and they can drop some of the penalty charges but they are expected to meet a recovery rate. In the centre we visited it was \$1400 per hour. They were therefore motivated to be very circumspect about what they would allow. Poor payers were coded in such a way that the technology directed their calls to those with most experience and who would achieve results for the company. Technology has been developed so that the connection system recognises the number of the caller and shuffles the call into the appropriate queue either for those with a history of bad debt or those who regularly meet their billing responsibilities on time.

The oral literacies of this group of employees were subtle. Competence was expressed in finding a balance between firmness and friendliness, control and casualness, outcome achievement and personal rapport. The oral interaction was deeply culturally embedded. It was heavily dependent upon community cultural attitudes. Both caller and operator enter into a relationship where they negotiated around unspoken community norms. On the basis of what constitutes 'a fair go', operators and customers arrived at arrangements that were accepted as reasonable by community

standards within the rules of the company. This is the measure of legitimacy which deems a decision to be justifiably lenient or excessively stringent. In our multicultural community, operators negotiate the politics of ethnicity and gender to deliver results across a broad spectrum of social and cultural groups. Operators negotiated in an environment where unpredictable issues could arise, issues of male authority for instance (a vast majority of the operators are female) or family emergencies or religious considerations. A decision determined as unfair could result in an appeal, even litigation.

The terms of the customer contract were seen as one-dimensional. They state that accounts are to be paid by a specified time and the task of the operator is to enforce that regulation while still sustaining customer loyalty. The development of a 'warranting tone' (Potter & Wetherall 1987) is a primary goal of trainers. A warranting tone is one which carries authority with such certainty that it communicates common sense with no invitation to challenge.

## Call centre cultures

The culture of call centres determines the tone and the language of literate operators. Call centre work was presented by management as a new dynamic industry with a youthful mind set:

If you walk around you see everything is very bright, there's music everywhere you go, the culture is very young ... We're a very young business, and we're a very unique business in the country ... there really hasn't been a past precedent where we know what to build on. We're doing things that no other business in the country has ever done before. (Call centre manager)

The call centres we visited had adopted the language of modern human resource management. Words have been appropriated from personal development spheres and given particular meaning in the industry. Terms such as 'integrity', 'empowerment', 'collaboration', 'support', 'innovation', 'creativity', 'aspiration', 'participation' peppered the conversation with managers and team leaders. Words had been redefined to reflect organisational productivity and profitability goals. Industry-literate operators know how to interpret these terms within the context of their work. They know how to display these values even if they do not expect to feel them and they understand that these words change their meaning in other social contexts. 'Teams' have particular meaning. Within call centres teams are structured as organisational units and as competing groups. The performance of each team is compared and has a weighty bearing on the evaluation of the team leader. This pressures the individual to maintain team standards but the focus of accountability is the individual. 'Your stats are everything. Nothing else matters. Nothing else matters at all' (call centre operator). Teams, social cohesion, points of improvement and other issues are only of interest in as much as they contribute to performance. Despite the team, the constant communication and the rhetoric 'it is a very lonely place out there on the phones' (call centre operator).

Call centre businesses are diverse, specialising in particular applications of communication. Operators involved in cold-calling sales learn to get their information across before the client can intervene in order to refuse the product on offer. Centres which provide technical assistance or specialised information require a different set of communication skills. However, handling abusive calls was a skill that all operators needed to acquire. Some operators estimated that up to 30% of calls were abusive:

People think you can say whatever you like on the phone. They can be very intimidating. They say things like 'What did you say your name was?' or 'You must be ★★★★★★ blonde not to understand that'. It can be very difficult to keep your cool. (Call centre supervisor)

Operators were taught to detach themselves from the interaction and to create a synthetic work self. As one call centre manager noted: 'You have to take on a different persona in this job. Those who can't, won't survive in the job'.

A supervisor explained that when she hears operators raising their voices, she intervenes, asks the operator to put the caller on hold, then counsels her to detach from the emotional content of the interaction. She helps operators to step aside from who they are and to recognise that the caller is

angry with the company rather than with them. Her task was to develop patience and resilience in her staff—an important generic skill.

However, operators were expected to emulate middle-class values—neither too toffy nor working class, in keeping with the traditions of the industry. Old photographs of telephonists demonstrate this has always been a job for respectable women but the level of supervision evident in the photographs suggests that these women were not trusted to work autonomously. While this was not atypical for many industries in the past, a union organiser explained that high levels of supervision have always characterised call centres. She proposed this as an explanation of why call centre workers have tolerated such a high level of micro-management.

For some, the demands of the industry encroach too intrusively on personal identity:

They want the impossible really. They want people who are friendly, bubbly, extrovert, but also focused and efficient. And they want people who they think will fit in with the culture of the place ... I was too much of an actual personality and I wasn't enough of a company girl. I didn't, I couldn't, I just don't think I could ... my personality was such that I could not actually stop being myself completely in order to become this persona that the company wanted me to be ... my stats were never quite good enough. (Call centre operator)

## Reading and writing literacies

For most operators, however, the written literacies were more limited. Recruiters did not administer written tests. They stated that they were not looking for reading and writing skills but they were assessing on indicators of oral communication and attitude:

We're looking for someone who's a team player, we're looking for someone who's got good personal management ... Collaboration, so team work, how they deal with people, customer relationship skills is obviously the most important one. (Call centre recruitment officer)

The reading and writing demands were highly customised. Operators needed to master relevant pieces of the company's information technology network and become familiar with the screens which are integral to the system. While the screens were concerned with text, and initially appeared confusing, operators said they got used to them quite rapidly. Credit management operators took very few notes but they were expected to record the payment contract negotiated with the caller. The language used tended to be repetitive and had become heavily coded. 'Hot keys' brought up commonly used sentences and other shorthand provided quick summaries of information. For example, 'customer advised that ...' became 'cust adv ...':

When you see what they write, you ... think 'what language is this in'? But they've got their favourite shorthand ... I mean apart from all the acronyms they have anyway 'fl' is field liaison, 'dst' is dedicated sales team. Then the ways that you actually help the client, whether you create a connect order, that's a 'cno'. You know, they wouldn't say, 'organised a technician to go out and visit', they'd just say cno, which is connect order, and then a date, that's all they do. You've got to speak the speak. (Call centre trainer)

Operators made up their own codes. There was a high tolerance for individual improvisation, as long as they were intelligible enough, and accurate in their use of the screen-based systems. Operators' notes were strongly influenced by short message system (SMS) texting codes used for mobile phones and chat room interchange. For example, late became 'L8', wait became 'W8', you became 'u'. Most written call centre literacies required only limited transfer from conventional writing; that is, regardless of an operator's level of competence as a writer in everyday life, they needed to learn a new code on entering a call centre, albeit English-based. However, operators needed to become very fluent and fast with the script. They talked about the skill of typing, listening and talking at the same time:

You couldn't afford to have anything on your mind or think about anything else because after one call is finished ... you are supposed to wrap up the call while you are on the call and then you couldn't go into the mode of 'after call work' to fix it up, you have to go straight onto the

next call so you stayed in 'available' all the time. In the end you didn't really listen to the client that well because you were so much into 'I've got to take the next call. I've got to move on'.

(Call centre operator)

Most call centre operators we spoke to were also expected to manipulate numbers. They took payments through credit cards, negotiated payment instalments, quoted costs of products and services, calculated overdue time periods, amounts outstanding and associated penalties. Working a calculator was a core skill along with keyboard skills. For most operators, records were at least partly numerical: times, dates, amounts to pay, amounts purchased, costs quoted, purchase codes, product/service numbers etc. were all recorded. Numeracy skills, as with reading and writing, were not tested by recruiters. However, the use of keyboards and calculators was addressed in induction training at the centre.

## The role of critical literacy

*Research question 1: What are the multiple (critical) literacies of aged care and call centre industries?*

Both industries in this study are highly proceduralised. Proceduralisation is a means of standardising workplace practice. Proceduralisation has a political and economic function in supporting centralised management structures and points of accountability.

It is questionable whether workers in aged care and call centres are able to fully apply critical literacy in Lankshear's terms given the closely guarded culture of compliance. Workers are unable to influence the direction of literacy practices. Critically literate employees:

- ♦ recognise the role of proceduralisation in managing workplace productivity
- ♦ recognise their own role in contributing to it.

In cooperating with it they may:

- ♦ provide information to sustain their operations
- ♦ make informed judgements in keeping with it
- ♦ suggest ways to improve monitoring processes or to increase productivity by refining the system.

Conversely, they may question centralised authority and act strategically to resist it.

Workers can only exercise complete literacy in all three of Lankshear's dimensions when they are fully conversant in the cultural dimension. Modifications and refinements to the communication practices are offered when employees have grasped the values and aspirations that drive the systems. This implies an understanding of the power and authority hierarchies and in modern business, the principles of centralisation. Key to this is the notion of proceduralisation.

Work, in the globalised economy, has become extensively 'proceduralised', meaning that workplace practices are described, documented, systematised and auditable. Proceduralisation has facilitated the central control of outcomes and management from afar by providing a common language (Farrell 2002) and a centralised authority. Hence local practices and local literacies are subservient to the centralised systems (Jackson 2000; Farrell 2001).

### Critical literacy in call centres

To exercise critical literacy in call centres, operators need to understand their organisational goals and points of accountability in order to either internalise them or circumvent them. One call centre operator demonstrated a clear understanding of this:

... those local managers know that the real way to manage something is to at least get some input from staff ... people who might sit in a local meeting and say, 'Look the better way to do this for the overtime allocation would be this idea'. They actually do take that on board because that is something they can organise locally. And as long as it works for them and they don't have to report back to Sydney on it, it's okay.

(Call centre operator)

The most valued operators displayed an understanding of proceduralisation, a willingness to fit within it and accept its constraints, to understand its motivation and to contribute within the confines. Within call centres, to accept the workplace constraints is to submit and support the inevitability, if not the virtue, of micro-management. As technology has developed, its application to data gathering on worker activity has been pervasive throughout industry (Postman 1993; Bain et al. 2002). These practices have become a normal element of contemporary performance and outcomes management as is evident in the following statement:

You can manage anyone's performance. I can tell you how many sales ... done by the girl at the Safeway counter. I can tell you how many people she has served. I can tell you how many items have gone through. The technology in the Safeway store is exactly the same (as that of call centres). So when you are managing their performance you need some sort of matrix to judge their performance. So I can tell you what my trainers do, I can tell you how many calls they do a day, how long it takes them to get a person through a specific course. We need to put some matrix<sup>5</sup> behind what you do if someone is going to judge your performance.

(Call centre registered training organisation manager)

Performance has come to be understood in terms of auditable units, which, in call centres, is based particularly on numerical data of time, numbers of calls, sales and recovery rates. Newly developed technology has facilitated a microscopic focus on the elements of productivity.

The implications for literacy are wide-reaching. If critical literacy has an application in this environment, operators not only need to understand the technology that measures productivity, but also they need to be able to comply with its dictums and cooperate with the procedures. Proficient operators will know what information is being sought and will maximise and source it. Furthermore, they will refine their workplace activity to accord with those measures and seek to constantly improve their scores. Critically literate call centre operators are able to stand aside from the communication system and evaluate it. If they choose to support it, they may suggest ways to increase or refine productivity by finding new ways for teams to compete. They may contribute new ideas to the reward and recognition schemes or suggest better ways of integrating training into practice or new motivators for sales personnel. They may also question the principles upon which it stands and argue for a new orientation.

## Critical literacy in aged care

In aged care, the principles were similar to those of call centres. While the level of technology was not yet as highly refined, the principles were increasingly being applied to the industry. The number of centralised control systems has grown significantly over the last five years and has similarly exercised dominion over workplace practices. The ascendancy of centralised control systems has been contested because the industry has been deprofessionalised. These new procedures have wrung the knowledge and judgement out of the core professional skills and left only a set of tasks. The politics of this phenomenon are relevant because they have restructured the industry and the literacies of aged care personnel and facilitated the growth of casual employment. Unlike call centre work, proceduralisation in aged care was designed, in part, to displace professionals from the frontline of care work by removing the easy and transferable aspects of the work and reconstructing the work of nurses into that of supervisors.

Like their call centre counterparts, the critical literacy of personal care attendants is truncated. Challenges to the system are unwelcome. The system is fixed. Critical literacy is confined to suggesting ways of supporting and extending it. Personal care attendants may suggest and implement new ways of monitoring residents or care practices or offering new ways of demonstrating compliance. They may suggest ways to facilitate the march of proceduralisation as it continues to diminish the role of professionals. In reviewing the revised training package, one of our

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<sup>5</sup> A matrix is provided by statistical data gathered on an employee's workplace activity which can be compared against organisational goals.

informants exclaimed: 'Is there anything that's going to be left in aged care for either the Division One or Division Two nurse to do?' (Aged care registered training organisation manager).

## Summary

It is debatable whether critical literacy has a role to play in these highly proceduralised workplaces. The work has become, in Lankshear's terms, two-dimensional. Those who are critical of the social and political implications of the regulatory practices are difficult to integrate into a workplace. Proceduralisation is a response to powerful economic forces. It is not negotiable. However, contributors are welcomed if they stand within the structures and comment upon the effectiveness and possible development of compliance procedures. Does this constitute Lankshear-style critical literacy and does it matter if an openly critical discourse is discouraged within workplaces? These questions are ones we return to, in part, later in the report.

## Transferability

*Research question 2: What strategies have contingent workers developed to facilitate the transfer of literacy skills?*

The background to this question lies in the following contextual considerations:

- *Proceduralisation* is an important mechanism of modern industry. It makes work transparent.

Transparent work is viewed as transferable:

- *Industry structures* governing casual employment influence transferability. In aged care casual employees are registered with specific facilities or belong to agencies and work across the industry. In call centres, agencies recruit casuals who then become ongoing staff members if they prove suitable. Both employment practices restrict the wide movement of casual employees across industry.

Transferability is a key issue within this research project and was at the heart of research question 2. Transferability is facilitated by proceduralisation which has standardised skills across the industry in the case of aged care, or within the enterprise, as in call centres.

## Proceduralisation

Proceduralisation had its origins in manufacturing production and carved the path for the mass production processes of the first half of the twentieth century (Taylor 1911). Its application to the service sector has been accelerated by the 'quality' agenda (Bain et al. 2002; Jackson 2000). It has facilitated a new world of work and challenges the job design of many 'skilled' employees in the past who developed their jobs and evolved their roles by contributing their individual capacity and imagination. By contrast, in contemporary highly systematised workplaces, work tasks are pre-defined. For many modern workers the job is done by working within the system designed at management level, often with little input from those actually doing the work. Predictability and lack of ambiguity are the hallmarks of this type of job interpretation even though this is never entirely achievable. Such a system provides a number of economic advantages. It:

- ✧ allows for centralised administration and global management process
- ✧ reduces the cost of the service or activity by replacing professionals with operators
- ✧ makes for accountability through auditing or micro-managing, if the technology is in place
- ✧ allows for high levels of casualisation of the workforce (which is of particular interest to this study).

The most valued skill of the incumbent, particularly the casual employee, is not to contribute their unique innovation, expertise or particular talent. Successful incumbents exhibit the skill to fit in by 'reading' the system and by seamlessly sustaining proscribed procedures. Work activity is

depersonalised and impartial and maintained by standards which ensure what was offered yesterday will be offered tomorrow in the same measure.

## Employment structure for casuals

In the aged care industry, casual staff may be employed by agencies and lent to facilities as the need arises. Alternatively, they are attached to particular facilities and are members of the 'bank'. In the facilities we visited, agency staff were a stop-gap measure requiring minimal investment on the part of facility managers. The casual employees who were members of the facility's bank of emergency staff, and hence likely to return, were better supported by facility managers. Those in the 'bank' were usually invited to staff meetings and development activities run by the facility, but they were not paid for attendance, so few came. Agency staff managed their own personal development.

However, in the call centres we visited the investment in casual staff was high. There was almost no distinction between casuals and ongoing employees:

... because we still needed the quality. We don't need 20 people there not answering the phones, being rude to customers, not collaborating, not having communications skills which are obviously imperative in this role. (Call centre manager)

Staff, both casual and ongoing, needed regular updates to ensure the information they were giving out was accurate and that their use of internal information technology screens was correct. In call centres the only differentiation between ongoing and casual staff was in their employment arrangements. Where casual employees only boosted the numbers for special campaigns and occasional staff shortages, ongoing staff worked all the time.

The partnership between employment agencies and workplaces was also different across the two industries. In aged care, employees remained the staff of the agency, and facilities which poached staff were penalised by the agency who charged a fee. In call centres, labour-hire agencies worked as recruiters. They hired the staff, managed their initial payroll and personnel responsibilities but relinquished them to the call centre if they proved capable at the end of the three-month trial period, although some still maintained their casual employment status. They were, however, much the same as ongoing members of staff with different employment conditions.

Casual employees therefore had a different reading of their expectations in terms of transferring skills.

## Transferring literacy skills in aged care

*Research question 2: What strategies have contingent workers developed to facilitate the transfer of literacy skills?*

Casual employees choose their mode of employment because it allows flexibility.

Transferability is contingent upon adequate cultural literacy.

In aged care, the transfer of literacies is an interpretative process.

Casual employees need to:

- read the culture to recognise the requirements
- adapt their activity to the values and norms of the organisation.

Good social skills allow casuals to develop allies to assist the transfer of skills.

Casual employees have little opportunity to develop or demonstrate critical literacy, largely because they are cut off from the community of practice where continuous improvement and decision-making take place.

Against this backdrop, let us investigate how casual employees transfer their skills. Within aged care, this involves:

- ✧ adapting their skills to the demands of different workplaces

- ✧ managing their own marketability and employability
- ✧ and in both industries, utilising their transferable generic skills.

The notion of contingent employment in the contemporary workforce is combined with notions of 'choice':

America's new economic emblem is self-reliant, footloose and independent ... A widespread middle-class prosperity—freeing people to demand more from their work than just a paycheck—and the shrinking lifespan of modern corporations have resulted ... in free agency.  
(Buffini 2001, p.39)

Contingent workers enjoy the limited flexibility of deciding when they will work, although that 'privilege' could not be assumed. Workers who exercised their right to refuse work too often were offered less and less. However, most contingent workers interviewed maintained this type of employment because it gave them flexibility to accommodate other obligations in their life, such as child care and study. Some in aged care mentioned that casual work allowed them to escape some stress and responsibility within the work, particularly that of documenting. However, for most it was a temporary measure until circumstances changed and more permanent work could be arranged.

Common sense understandings of transferability are constrained by the necessity to adapt activities to the organisational identity which establishes the workplace priorities. No matter how generic a workplace, organisational and cultural particulars make each one unique:

When it comes to the way of showering in the morning or whatever, that's the same but ... the organisation inside is different. In one place we have to serve the residents at the kitchen ... At another facility we bring the residents to the dining room and we stay backwards, we just keep an eye on them while they're there in the dining room. And give the tablets in the moment, that's all you do, then ... help them back to their rooms after dinner. So that's really different in each organisation.  
(Aged care casual employee)

Facilities are always organisationally different but other differences call for a more culturally sensitive and analytical understanding of what is required:

Some organisations have got a much more task-oriented basis to them. So long as everybody is shot through the shower and sitting up bright and neat by 9.30 in the morning, this is the kind of worker we want. Others have got a very different understanding of what good residential care is about and they will not castigate the worker who is slow and thorough. They will nurture her, they will make time for the worker and appreciate the worker putting in the sort of level of communication with the residents, sitting down reading the newspaper, for example.  
(Aged care trainer)

Contingent workers needed to read the requirements and adapt their work priorities accordingly. Many facilities employed contingent workers for a four-hour block at the beginning of the day to assist with the morning routine of showering, breakfasting and room preparation. The pressure to get through the case load in the time was a constant source of stress in some facilities:

... but then you've got the other, say 15-odd people, that are in your floor, you've still got to make their beds too. So you're not just getting them up, saying, 'How are you?' and then assisting them, you've really got to ... it's like going back to being a mother with a young toddler, you really have to push them. And they [management] expect you to be able to get somebody up, dressed, showered, toileted, depending on their dependency on you as a personal care attendant, within 10 minutes. And I just figured it was just a physical impossibility.  
(Aged care contingent employee)

Ability to achieve the tasks within the timeframe were related less to the skill of time management than to a reading of the principles of quality which govern the organisation—knowing what was essential, where corners could be cut and where they couldn't was a skill of cultural interpretation:



There was no way known you could physically finish what they gave you to do in that shift ... things probably only got done to 65–70% capacity. Nothing would have been fulfilled to the 100%. And that's what upset me more, because I just felt that nobody could work at that pace, and feel fulfilled as far as giving the job their best. (Aged care contingent employee)

Contingent workers could not afford to be rigid in their transference of good practice. They needed to make a judgement between the principles they had learned as best practice and those that were the norm in the organisation:

... we're not allowed, according to the rule, to do more movements than 20 degrees bending forwards. It gets to the point you're not allowed to say hello to a resident because you make too much movement with your hands. Your head is not allowed to bend more down than 20 degrees forwards, backwards that's ... impossible. If you make a bed, you're not allowed to go over the half of the bed. But if the bed is low, lift the bed more. So you only have 20 degrees ... it's not possible. (Aged care contingent employee)

Transferability was therefore not a literal process; it was an interpretative process whereby the individual personal care attendant decided what concessions should be made to maintain consistency with the workplace culture and values. They needed to draw upon their experience and their training within a generic framework and predict the way tasks were interpreted, an acknowledged transferable skill.

Skills of reading the workplace and fitting within its culture were keys to success, if success meant positive acclaim from supervisors and being invited to return to the workplace. Managing relationships, managing time and communication emerged as pivotal skills in getting the job done and in working cooperatively with co-workers and residents. Casual workers needed to read the system but that does not imply reading the procedures. There was no time for that. Where they were unsure of the system, they needed to apply their skills in relating to others and being adaptive and resourceful. In particular, they needed the confidence to ask, but to do so without eliciting a negative response from ongoing staff whom they frequently encounter, which went something like:

'Oh no, not agency [staff] again'. Because you don't know them [the routines and the residents], you're going to be asking questions ... they get very sick of it. And that's understandable. People get very tired of having to sort of, be carrying you, that's the way I see it, as carrying. (Aged care contingent employee)

Despite the perils of this response, casual workers needed to negotiate their own support and cooperation networks. To get the job done they may need to negotiate for the use of the lifting machine or to find out who needed incontinence pads, how many the facility budget allowed per person and what the priorities were for different clients. Most of this information was available in the care plans. There was an acknowledged expectation that care plans should be read by everyone. Although some trainers argued that this was possible within the shift, most managers and employees recognised that this expectation was unrealistic. Getting the case load done in the time allocated was a challenge for even the most experienced casual employee:

What you learn is before you touch a resident, you have to read the care plan, to know what their needs are ... In a care plan it's written in there that she needs two persons to get out of the bed, that I have to put a pad on because she's incontinent, because I really don't know that. So when I work at a new place I should, technically, sit down and read the care plan. So if I get six residents, I get six care plans. I'm going to sit down for two-and-a-half hours, reading care plans? It's not possible. Because you can only do six residents in the morning, you really need all the time to do them. (Aged care contingent employee)

Care plans could be 20 or 30 pages long, although most facilities provided an abbreviated two-page version, but nevertheless staff found there was no time to access them in the hurry of the morning. Contingent personal care attendants depended upon cooperative links with other carers to retrieve this information. In places where there was a large number of casual staff from the same agency, they supported each other, but where there were only one or two, casual employees needed to

develop their own temporary networks; in particular, they needed to develop their own learning and coping strategies.

Agency staff, and sometimes other contingent staff, were less likely to have to commit information to print because of the particular cultural requirements of the literacy. They were expected to be receptive to the cultural literacy of the industry and the workplace and to adapt their work behaviour accordingly, but they were not expected to generate records beyond marking-off tasks achieved.

Since they did not know the residents, documenting was seen as beyond their requirements. Documentation was based upon continuity of care. Knowing the resident, what care activity had occurred before, the expectations of the family and the capacity of the facility could all influence what was written. Agency staff were therefore not in a position to have this information. In fact a number of non-English speaking background workers admitted to remaining as agency staff because they were afraid of the documentation requirements:

It's very good for me because you don't have any paperwork to fill, and for me ... they always ask me to come back to the facility, always. I have always my name first because I'm very good with my job, but not with my speaking. (Aged care contingent employee)

Most personal care attendants who worked in aged care facilities did so because they were dedicated to caring and working with old people. Many found their motivations were diminished through casual work where relationships were temporary and functional:

Agency work is just terrible ... especially because you don't know the residents ... you feel like the biggest stranger. You can't remember the names ... you can't be emotional. You treat them all like cars, you just wash cars. (Aged care contingent employee)

Contingent workers who expressed the greatest satisfaction with their work knew the facility and the residents. They were people in the facility's bank rather than agency staff. A sense of isolation and alienation was reported as the most negative part of casual work. A lack of belonging prevented contingent workers from contributing and participating as fully literate employees. While contingent personal care attendants exhibited highly refined cultural literacy skills, there was little opportunity to exercise critical literacy skills. They could have opinions and most had extensive experience, given the broad range of institutions they had visited, but they did not attend staff meetings, they did not belong to sub-committees to advise on change, they were not part of the discussions which contributed critical comment on workplace activity and they were not asked to contribute their ideas. This was consistent with the observation of others in their understanding of contingent workers (Billett 2001). Skills associated with continuous improvement and workplace participation did not apply to casual workers. To work as a contingent worker was to work within constrained literacies.

## Transferable generic skills in both industries

*Research question 2: What strategies have contingent workers developed to facilitate the transfer of literacy skills?*

In both industries generic skills were important and sought by recruiters.

Behavioural interviewing was adopted by some to expose generic skills.

Trainers work with generic knowledge to develop competence, particularly in areas of human interaction.

Generic skills are those which transfer across vocational areas to enable individuals to work effectively with others, to contribute to the organisation and to achieve personal satisfaction. They include not only the skills of employability but also those of career progression, of learning, motivation, planning and organising and self management to name a few. Extensive work has been done in the area both overseas and in Australia (DeSeCo Project 2002; Gonczi 2002; Kearns 2001;

Curtis & McKenzie 2001). As noted in the literature review, a suite of studies has been published by NCVER (2004). Extensive lists of generic skills have been generated and critiqued. Contingent employees are positioned on the frontline of the employment market and are subject to assessment of these skills daily. Within the current environment, they drive their own employability.

Our research reinforces observations made in our previous study of generic skills, that well-developed generic skills are essential for employability. The cultural literacies of both industries highlight the utilisation of social, relational and learning literacies along with the capacity to read workplace cultures. Contingent employees with these skills were considered employable in both industries, despite their limited reading and writing literacy. Those without them were not employed. Most casual employees we encountered appeared to be flexible and positive in their outlook. The most vulnerable workers in the workforce were not the contingent workers but those ongoing employees working in aged care centres who had few generic skills combined with written literacies which were not applicable.

Studies of generic skills make the point that there is no one set of generic skills which applies universally across the workforce. The package of dispositional knowledge, skills and attributes needed depends upon the industry, the job and the workplace culture. Those which have been named as common to both industries in this research have very specific and different application on the ground. However, it is interesting to note those skills identified by contingent workers which were applicable to both.

Maturity and life experience were acknowledged in both industries as of generic value. A call centre trainer made the point that:

They want them young so they are cheap but they don't want them that young that they don't have the understanding. Some of the best people are mothers returning to work. They've got life skills, they've got communication skills, they have maturity.

(Call centre registered training organisation manager)

A call centre operator noted that the people who are most likely to stay around in the job are the more mature employees who had developed resilience. People like parents and grandparents were cited.

The same was true of the aged care industry. One mature male casual employee made the following remark:

For a guy the idea of being that intimate with people and their bodies and their emotions and their minds is something I don't think I would have been mature enough at 18 or 19. At 40 I still don't know that I would have thought it was something worthwhile but certainly now at 50 something, I do.

(Aged care worker)

Both jobs involve intense interaction with others and an interest in and an understanding of the reactions, cultural orientation and motivation of those with whom they interact. The ability to display tolerance, empathy, anger management and the ability to monitor and control one's emotions (Goleman 1996) are generic qualities highly sought in both industries.

The business of identifying these skills within individuals is an inexact science. Some call centres spoke of staff selection methods based on behavioural interviewing. Behavioural interviewing invites applicants to talk about their experiences to demonstrate how they reacted to challenging situations. This method attempts to expose the gap between applicants' espoused theory and their theory in use (Argyris 1991), although this process suffered from the bias of subjectivity: interviewees' anecdotes are coloured by the speaker's palette and, where their interests are clearly at stake, the colours may be of a vastly different hue from those of other observers. That aside, recruiters expressed great faith in the system. In another instance, recruiters set up group interviews. Throughout the recruitment process, applicants were invited to participate in a group activity. Recruiters were not looking for those who led the group but for those who could contribute without taking over. They were looking for those who exhibited a level of assertiveness but who were willing to commit to the system.

Trainers in both industries worked with this generic knowledge constantly. Call centre trainers discussed client reactions and analysed ways in which clients might express anxiety, uncertainty or confidence over the phone. They assisted employees to manage these emotions in achieving organisational outcomes. This knowledge underpins the effective achievement of competencies cited in the training package, such as 'Manage workplace relations in a contact centre' or 'Resolve complex customer complaints'.

Aged care presented a similar situation: workers who had learned to work with resistant residents, who recognised and resolved their fears and who understood the unpredictable logic of those affected by dementia. This was a generic skill:

It can mean spending a lot of time with a person. Getting them to the right frame of mind so you can initiate something like showering or having a drink of water. You could spend 10 or 15 minutes trying to get them on side so that they will just have a drink of water.

(Aged care personal care attendant)

These skills are subsumed in the endorsed national competencies such as 'Communicate appropriately with clients and colleagues' or 'Identify client's needs' as an element of 'Deliver and monitor service to clients'. However, the concern on the part of trainers is that these skills are buried within the unit and they worry about what emphasis to give and how much space they should take in the curriculum.

Contingent workers in the workplace are assessed on their ability to manage daily tasks, their capacity to get them done and to maintain their resilience. These skills are often dependent upon their level of generic skills. Contingent workers are not employed for their 'big picture' skills—their enterprise planning and management skills or their critical evaluation. They are employed to fill a temporary gap and to complete tasks as if an ongoing employee. The smaller the interruption to the organisation's routine, the better their performance.

## Managing employability and transferability in aged care

*Research question 2: What strategies have contingent workers developed to facilitate the transfer of literacy skills?*

Aged care contingent workers managed their employability by increasing the number of skills in their 'kitbag' which required the following literacies:

- good informal learning skills—ability to seek out and integrate learning opportunities
- appropriate dispositional learning
- good deductive and predictive skills which, along with dispositional skills, were more important than reading and writing. Reading the context was more important than reading the text.

Older non-English speaking background workers without these skills were being forced out of the industry according to our informants.

As part of their role in managing the transferability of their skills, contingent workers need to ensure their own marketability in both their technical repertoire and their generic competence.

To apply the analogy proposed by Down (2001), casuals carry with them a kitbag of skills which they apply and adapt in response to their reading of the work demand. This analogy is particularly applicable in the aged care industry. Managing the kitbag is one of the adaptive meta skills that aged care contingent workers demonstrated. It is therefore a literacy which is dependent upon reading the world (Freire 1983, p.10).

Possession of good informal learning skills was one of the most important literacies, since experience was the most valuable tool in their kitbag. Experienced contingent workers were more sought after:

I do it [casual work] because everywhere where I ask for a job they ask how long do you have experience. I work for experience I don't work for money. (Aged care contingent employee)

Contingent work can therefore be a strategic choice and can provide a rich learning environment for those who were able to integrate the learning. Work in nursing homes, rather than hostels, could add to your kitbag of medical skills:

... in hostels, a lot of the girls never work out of hostels. They don't know how to put on pads. If there is a bit of problem, a bit different, they don't know how to judge things because they've never seen it before ... In nursing homes ... some people don't get out of bed any more. Pressure sores are a big problem ... So every two hours you turn them right side, back, other side ... That's what you learn there. And then you see all kind of conditions, like feeding, feeding through the stomach, bowel bags, catheters ...

(Aged care contingent employee)

Experience was valuable but there was no structured program and no network of support to assist the learning. Individuals mediated their own learning as best they could. Contingent workers interviewed talked about the skills of following and learning from observation:

... if you come to a certain situation if you don't know it, well you have to ask 'what shall I do here, I have never done this before?' ... They [ongoing staff] have to tell you because if you don't do it the right way they'll have problems after, so they will show you. Even if they don't want to show you they have to do it in front of you. So you pick it up. Then you have seen this condition before. So when you get to it the second time, the same condition, you can say 'I know how to do this or that'.

(Aged care contingent employee)

Weakness or lack of confidence in reading and writing in English may be an impediment but it could be overcome with strong learning skills. One interviewee working in an aged care facility had severe difficulties with reading and writing. However, she needed only to be told things once and she remembered them. She depended on patterns and predictable practices which she could extrapolate from one facility to the other, although she was employed mostly at one facility. She made considerable effort to camouflage her disability. She was aided by her strong deductive capacity, her social skills in eliciting assistance and the proceduralisation of work activity. Texts could be anticipated once she had deciphered general headings and categories. Colour coding of products and consistent and systematic storage patterns made for predictability in using correct products, information and equipment. Format was important, for instance in material safety data sheets (MSDS), where headings were consistent and directed the eye to important pieces of information. Diagrams made for quick decoding of information. Where instructions came in diagrammatic form, such as with physiotherapy exercises and food safety instructions, material could be quickly digested. When called upon to produce texts, she drew upon models around her:

Sometimes you might get asked to write in the journals what they've done for the day, I find that really stressful ... But usually I flick through what's been written before and see how they write and see how much they write... quite big words sometimes ... And they also have a program on the wall which lists the activities, so that has all the spelling really you need. So you can find out you know, 'so and so's had a fantastic day' 'cos someone else's written 'fantastic' or some other word like fantastic, you just copy it. (Aged care contingent employee)

Contingent employees with inappropriate reading and writing skills expressed considerable anxiety about their skills. Managers explained that the demand for qualifications has squeezed many of the older non-English speaking background workers out of the industry. Those who have remained in work were most likely to be established in workplaces where their strong social networks assisted in mediating the reading and writing tasks. Most of all they were concerned about the workplace of the future as they observed the escalating demand for reading and writing skills in the workplace:

Accreditation has meant it [the aged care industry] is more professional, it is bigger. It requires staff to have a higher level of literacy because you just can't get away with 'I can't

write this'. Everyone is required to do some level of writing. I think it would be increasingly harder to stay employed if you haven't got literacy skills. (Aged care consultant)

Older workers who resisted change and avoided communication and learning were not the personalities encountered among the contingent employees in this study. Some were long-term ongoing employees, others had left the facilities, with the threat of increased demands. As noted in our previous research (Virgona et al. 2003), appropriate dispositional knowledge and attitudes were essential literacies for success. Being cheery and conversational helps in forming spontaneous cooperative relationships which are essential in a workplace where you need assistance to know what is required. It was also the persona specified as important in aged care. Workers who were not bright and friendly were seen to be wanting. Aged care trainees were told: 'Part of your role is to walk in with a smile and chat to your residents when you're showering them, sing to them if you can ...'.

People with limited fluency in English could be very successful in the industry if they could communicate warmth and inclusion. One non-English speaking background carer with limited English found that her skill at coaxing reluctant residents into the shower made her highly sought-after as a casual. Another used singing and dancing in her interaction with residents and added skills in massage to respond to the 'skin hunger' of residents.

Dispositional knowledge was seen as far more important than reading and writing:

We don't hear clients saying 'Don't send Mary back because of her language or literacy skills'.  
We are more likely to hear 'don't send Mary back because she is lazy'. (Agency manager)

In both industries, recruitment agencies expected applicants to understand the importance of dispositional knowledge and to exhibit appropriate attitudes. Judgements were being made in this domain as soon as contact was made with the applicant. Receptionists who made telephone contact or who greeted interviewees could be asked to contribute their experience of the applicant gathered through formal interviews. Applicants were quickly disqualified if they exhibited lethargy, lack of attention or poor social skills. In one job interview witnessed during our data gathering, the applicant displayed her insecurities in a way considered inappropriate. She talked about her anxieties with her mother and that she was receiving counselling. This level of disclosure made her a less attractive candidate than others in a competitive market. Hence she was excluded from the next stage of selection. In contrast, the young personal care attendant referred to earlier with the reading and writing disability, camouflaged her disability. She displayed a higher level of cultural literacy than the applicant who disclosed freely.

Another significant adaptive skill/literacy was that of managing the relationship with the agency. In the contemporary job market, contingent workers have a responsibility to market their own employability. Those we interviewed had developed a relationship with the agency and had identified their strengths and work preferences to enable a good match when work became available. Agencies judged the willingness, resourcefulness and cooperativeness of their employees. Even contingent workers needed to communicate a commitment to the business values of the agency. This was a literacy managed with varying levels of competence by those seeking work.

## Employability and transferability in call centres

*Research question 2: What strategies have contingent workers developed to facilitate the transfer of literacy skills?*

Call centre operators have limited opportunity to transfer skills. Skills are developed by:

- ♦ establishing clear goals which incorporate key performance indicators
- ♦ very limited variation on general scripts
- ♦ very regular feedback through intense supervision
- ♦ incentives and competitions focused on key performance indicators
- ♦ peer tutoring for those needing assistance.

In call centres, no operator begins work on the phones without a careful induction. Induction could be short in some less reputable centres, but those which projected a company identity and believed in professional standards, inducted over several weeks. Companies investigated for this research provided an induction program of three to six weeks, during which time new employees learned to read the screens, became fluent with the software and refined their communication skills to accord with the identity of the organisation. Workers acquire independence inch by inch in call centres.

The application of interpretation and judgement skills were minimal. Framework scripts were often employed, but we observed that even small variations had to be ratified by supervisors:

When I say to them, you know, this is what you basically have to say ... but you can word it how you want. When they've thought of the wording they'll come across and run it past you, they won't go cold ... At the moment we are telling consultants that they must ask for a credit card. Now, on every call, if they're saying to a customer 'I can take that payment by credit card or can you pay by credit card?' 'Can you pay by credit card today?' is a little bit confronting to the customer. So quite a few of the consultants will say something like 'I can help you out by taking your credit card payment today'. Not so confronting ... you also have a couple that might say something like 'Are you aware that I'm able to take your credit card payment today?'.  
(Call centre supervisor)

Towards the end of the induction program, employees worked alongside an experienced operator taking calls, observing calls and analysing the details of the interaction. Once having 'graduated', supervision was still intense. Within the micro-managed framework, feedback was constant. Targets were clearly identified and stated in key performance indicators. Statistical data on an individual's performance were available on an hourly, daily and weekly basis as the operator gained proficiency. Even experienced operators had weekly or fortnightly assessments where a full page of items were evaluated and which included call management, rapport, presentation of company, on-selling, call closure and fine details of voice and wording, as well as the recording of information and the use of the information technology system. Performance on each item was scored numerically so progress could be measured and graphed. Cumulative scores measured and compared team performance. Achievements were rewarded with incentives, and competitions encouraged operators to focus on the performance goals. In one centre, all operators participated in a weekly one-to-one review and assessment lasting 30 minutes. Behaviour was closely examined and new targets set. Supervisors encouraged the exchange of skills between staff. Those with particular strengths were partnered with those who needed development. Skilled operators were therefore introduced to coaching roles while being acknowledged for their abilities.

Learning processes could be transferred into a system in which an accredited qualification was achieved, whereby written training exercises were combined with performance measures to achieve competencies. Operators undertaking traineeships worked on their workbooks in quiet moments at their desks. Workbook texts observed during this study called for recall of information. Case study activities asked learners how they would respond in a variety of situations and tested them on codes. Text-based activity centred on rote learning and recall to achieve a pass mark, rather than the interpretation and analysis of their supervisor's feedback.

In order to be successful in this environment, employees needed to submit to the intensity of the supervision. This in itself is a significant generic skill. Nevertheless, every attempt was made to present the supervision as a relationship based on cooperation and learning rather than surveillance and micro-management:

So it's not about micro-managing, supervising, being autocratic from the manager of the call centre, it's about using the experience of the supervisor to help the trainee to better their performance. I think about what I do, I learn and I refine that every day, based on information that I get. I make a mistake on the phone ... I shouldn't have done it that way. I know when I have made a mistake because the outcome wasn't achieved the way I wanted it

to. The ... coach could have said, 'You needed to do it another way. Did you see how it isolated the caller?' blah blah blah. So they are learning all the time. They are not taking it as criticism. (Call centre trainer)

The values underpinning the intensity of this training emphasise the significance of enterprise-specific skills rather than those imported from outside the organisation and because of this, it left some applicants with a tentative ownership of their kitbag. The skills were not theirs to adapt and apply, it was rather that they needed to present themselves to potential employers as malleable and able to be shaped by the workplace. This work design brings into question whether the employee can 'bring themselves' to the job to any significant extent, and whether the adoption of the 'synthetic self' has to be total.

## Teaching for transferability

*Research questions 3, 4 and 5:*

*How are employees prepared for the literacy and communication demands of different workplaces?*

*Is transferability formally or informally taught and if so does it ease the transfer of skills between workplaces?*

*How do workplace trainers and training providers support trainees to develop transferability in literacy and communication skills?*

The two models of training (the aged care 'best practice' and the call centre competitive excellence) result in different ways of conceptualising transferability.

### **Best practice model**

Characterised by commonly accepted industry-wide benchmarks which result in:

- ♦ common reference points for employers, trainers and trainees
- ♦ transferability becomes a by-product
- ♦ trainers may consult to achieve consistency across industry
- ♦ valuing of cross-facility transferability.

The national training package acknowledges variation and flexibility but the activities of industry auditors encourage measurable and comparable notions of competence. Transferability in aged care is understood as a common-sense process where a worker does the same thing in different places.

### **Competitive excellence model**

Characterised by globalised competitive industry, hence it has:

- ♦ internal reference points
- ♦ trainers who established relevance by supporting company key performance indicators
- ♦ low valuing of cross-enterprise transferability.

Competence does not include transferability as it does in aged care. Transferability is appreciated as a non-specific set of generic skills which include work ethic, adaptability and a positive personality orientation which forms the platform for the specific skills of the enterprise.

The Australian Quality Training Framework has focused attention on language, literacy and numeracy.

The registered training organisations involved in this study:

- ♦ recognised and supported the equity values espoused
- ♦ supported learners in class work and placement arrangements
- ♦ were sensitive to language issues in texts and assessment.

Registered training organisation managers are instrumental in setting learning priorities.

Questions 3, 4 and 5 cover overlapping territory relating to trainers and their handling of transferability. In order to avoid repetition, the following section deals with these interrelated questions.

Organisations participating in this study fall into two categories:

- ✧ those which are government audited and therefore focused on an externally dictated 'best practice' model



✧ those which are seeking competitive excellence and focused on internal benchmarks.

In the former, transferability is understood as an ‘outside-in’ process based on internalising the model and adapting it to the varying circumstances found in work environments. Experienced workers make judgments about where and how adaptations can be made, maintaining fidelity to the model. In the latter, transferability is understood as an ‘inside out’ process based on the underpinning knowledge and experience that an individual brings with them and upon which the superstructure of particular knowledge and skill can be built. The greater the knowledge and experience, the easier it is to build the superstructure.

The different conceptions result in:

- ✧ a different approach to the issue of transferability
- ✧ a different reference point for learning
- ✧ a different relationship between the registered training organisation and the workplace.

Best practice approaches to training are constantly dealing with questions of transfer, while those working with the competitive model have no interest in addressing transfer in training. Nevertheless, they are interested in capitalising on the opportunities it brings.

In aged care, literacies are customised to suit the industry, but in call centres literacies are customised to the organisation. To illustrate the point, the way each industry uses case studies can be noted. Both aged care and call centre trainers made extensive use of case studies but the questions of learners were of a different nature. Aged care trainers asked learners how they could reconcile the particular case study to the literacies of the funding and auditing system, while call centre trainers asked how learners could apply their literacies to maximise enterprise outcomes within the study.

## Transferability in aged care

Within aged care, industry-wide regulation and proceduralisation provide benchmarks against which facilities may be compared. As noted earlier, proceduralisation is based on compliance to regulations rather than efficiency and productivity principles.

Auditing processes are sustained by a notion of a generic workplace. It is assumed that skills and practices need only a little adjustment to meet particular workplace requirements. Although the aged care accreditation document is largely stated in terms of principles, the application of the principles cannot be left open to interpretation or subjectivity. Managers in aged care stand to have their facility closed down if their interpretation is seen to be indefensible by auditors. Hence managers seek out an interpretation of the principles which has met auditors’ approval. As a result, principles are particularised into visible activities dictated by the decisions of auditors. Auditor-sanctioned practices are then reflected in industry-wide documenting processes and disseminated by information sharing between facilities.

By way of example, the principles of privacy and respect have been translated into specific practices; such as, an incontinent resident must be covered with a towel if they don’t make it to the bathroom on time and their mishap is evident to others; discussion of bowel and bladder movement must be held in private; a client’s condition cannot be discussed in front of domestic staff or others not responsible for their care. While these practices may be highly laudable, they have become *the* way in which privacy and respect are demonstrated. Effort tends to be concentrated on policing the practice rather than realising that the principle and any variation requires considerable explanation. A common language has evolved in which a norm has been established to the extent that words such as ‘respect’, ‘dignity’, ‘behaviours’, ‘intervention’ have acquired particular, restricted meaning within the application of the accreditation guidelines and which are being constantly refined by the activities of auditors.

Auditors also exercise authority over the application and management of training packages. The training package promotes holistic assessment and emphasises diversity and the individuality of residents, but the activities of auditors exert a powerful influence over notions of competence. Auditors are seeking visible evidence of compliance which ultimately become reflected in the measure of sameness. This is in contrast with the management of activities in pursuit of, presumably the same, end goals (Sandberg 2000). Notions of transferability are intertwined with observable sameness and, in large measure, now constitute competence.

The registered training organisations working in aged care involved in this study presented learners with a bevy of ‘what if’ scenarios, utilising situations in different facilities and others which conflicted with accreditation positions. Paperwork prepared by different facilities was presented to the trainees and they were assisted with identifying the generic requirements of the particular example before them. Practice documents were assessed by applying principles of intelligibility and comprehensiveness. Questions were asked such as: Is the text sufficiently specific and are the syntax and grammar applied unambiguously? ‘Could this be used in court?’ was the criterion often applied by trainers.

Trainers visited trainees on site where they worked through the anomalies of the application of good practice principles to the working environment. Trainees interviewed after their placement reported a high level of consistency between the practices they were taught in the classroom and their experience on the floor. Those who experienced a mismatch analysed the specific instances and were able to recognise the deviation from the model. In one instance a trainee talked about the time pressures in the facility:

They had to take short cuts like not washing under folds of skin. They are meant to do arm raises to exercise residents so they do it in the shower a few times and say they have done it.  
(Personal care attendant trainee)

These contradictions created some anxieties for the trainee. The culture of the workplace conflicted with the culture of best practice. However, all trainees interviewed agreed that their training had equipped them with the resources to understand the rationale behind accreditation practices, the expectations of them in terms of the best practice model and the knowledge of the accreditation benchmarks around which to negotiate variations. Trainees expressed gratitude to their trainer who visited them on location. With her assistance they could reconcile anomalies between practice and theory. One learner for instance, observed poor practice in the documenting of incident reports which contradicted her understanding of best practice. The trainer took up this issue with the facility manager and established a common understanding which resulted in modifications demonstrating greater fidelity to the accreditation requirements. In this instance the external trainer took on the role of consultant assisting the organisation to improve its practice, and in so doing, exercised some critical literacy.

Where best practice models were clearly in place, the teaching of transferability acquired definition. The best practice models clarified literacy goals and generated curriculum. Many of the ambiguities experienced in different workplaces were resolved when workplace and trainer recognised that both were dealing with a single set of external benchmarks, agreed by both to be important. Learners identified themselves as members of an industry and could articulate the transferability of their knowledge and skills. The literacies of particular workplaces, in this sense, were secondary to the dominant discourse which was more abstract and decontextualised.

## Transferability in call centres

Call centre training, on the other hand, created different challenges for participating registered training organisations. In situations where a registered training organisation was working in an industry where benchmarks were set internally and based on competitive global markets, the trainer’s work was more ambiguous. The registered training organisations involved in this study were either external and working in different sites, or attached to one company and dedicated to that business. To win the business of a call centre, external registered training organisations

demonstrated their interest in extending and consolidating the efficiency and profitability of the centre. Most call centres have an internal ranking and promotion system based upon credits achieved through the recognition of skills based upon their key performance indicators (KPIs). In the eyes of the call centre company these credits have supremacy over externally acquired qualifications. It was explained that the registered training organisations which were most successful in the industry were those which worked in concert with the workplace systems and which provided contextualised training closely tied to company key performance indicators. Skills achieved through the training could be translated into accredited skills recognised in the training package and in the goals of the company. Hence competence was determined at site level.

Contingent employees were not usually invited to participate in accredited training offered by the employer. They may, however, have sought training from an external registered training organisation in an attempt to broaden and deepen the skills on offer to potential employers. Nevertheless, the largest component of call centre skills are taught in the workplace on the phones. Successful registered training organisations negotiate the program with the workplace management, identifying a link between the skills which managers are seeking and those described in the training package. Many call centres do not offer accredited training and have no links with registered training organisations or ANTA and displayed relatively little interest in industry-wide standards. Learning programs were said to be most effective when they incorporated the training resources of the organisation, particularly the supervisor. As one trainer noted:

So I actually entrench the workplace coach in my delivery model ... I get these guys [the learners] to actively seek out the workplace coach to help them do things ... They talk with their supervisors and with their peers as resources. That means they're receptive to the coaching ... So I actually have two people who become learners at different levels and that builds on my educational model of lifelong learning and reflective practice.

(Call centre registered training organisation trainer)

As with aged care trainers, where external trainers entered a workplace in a learning relationship, they were sometimes able to take on a consultancy role. If they gained credibility as consultants, they were able to contest current practices and suggest new efficiencies which better met the needs of learners as well as the business. In one instance, a trainer suggested ways to simplify the screens to accommodate the literacy level of the trainees but argued for the change on the basis of efficiency and reduced ambiguity for all operators. Non-essential material was removed from the screen and tick boxes replaced the need to generate sentences. However, individuals, particularly contingent employees, were unlikely to be able to achieve such changes on their own.

Internally referenced proceduralised patterns were the focus of training. Proceduralisation was employed not only as a means to efficiency and financial accountability, but also as an instrument of brand creation and continuity of customer service. Customers want to feel assured that, regardless of who answers the phone, information and services remain constant. They want to be able to continue the conversation they started yesterday even if the operator is different. Transferable skills have limited currency between call centres. Call centre managers did not provide any automatic discounts in terms of training credits to those with qualifications and experience. If they proved to be more competent than call centre fledglings, they could be rewarded with promotions but there was no automatic recognition. Call centre employers do not require qualifications to enter the industry. The Certificate II in Call Centre Communications demonstrates a basic understanding of computers and telephones and is sometimes taught off-site. However, even those who are recruited with a Certificate III in Call Centre Communications are usually still required to undergo the full induction training. Recruiters were not looking to directly transfer the skills of operators, and in some cases, they reported that operators sustained the practices and culture of the previous call centre which derailed the current employer's practice. Depending on the context, operators from sales centres could be too customer-service focused, or those from debt-collection centres too confronting and legalistic or too impersonal, unspontaneous and routine-driven because of their past experience. So 'transferability' was contingent upon cultural literacies specified within the centre.

This perhaps contradicts the understandings and assumptions which underpin the accredited qualification.

The revised Customer Contact Training Package assembles all customer contact skills within the same package and replaces its predecessor which addressed only call centre operations. The revised package links telephone skills, face-to-face communication and electronic communication, making a more explicit connection to the transferability of the skills between different mediums of communication. The industry has initiated these changes and hence endorses the value of transferability, but it still sustains an unshakeable commitment to the individual company and worksite. Nonetheless, experience was valued because it demonstrates capacity to relate on the phone and to analyse the detail of telephone interaction. Accredited training provided evidence of experience.

Customer service could provide applicable transfer of target literacies:

If you've worked at Myers before, that is very good training for us ... in a retail environment because you can string a sentence together, you can talk to people, you can elicit information from people, you can listen to them and understand what they have said. (Call centre trainer)

Although transferability was not strongly identified in the call centre industry, there is a great deal that is transferable—the knowledge of the industry, the skills of listening, speaking and writing at the same time, the ability to conduct synthetic relationships, the ability to manage calls to achieve outcomes in minimal time, the capacity to maintain concentration all day within an intensive, although repetitive, interactive environment. However, these skills were not named or given explicit value in the employment processes we witnessed.

## Integrating literacy

In considering the concerns raised by the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium research into the integration of language, literacy and numeracy into the training packages (Haines & Bickmore Brand 2000; Sanguinetti & Hartley 2000), those training organisations involved in this research demonstrated high levels of awareness and concern for the needs of language and literacy learners. They espoused equity values and were conscious of the language demands of course materials and assessments. It would appear that the Australian Quality Training Framework has had marked impact upon training organisations in raising awareness of language and literacy issues. Effort was made to minimise the mismatch between the language requirement of the work and that of the training. Aged care trainers in particular, discussed strategies they had established to support learners. These included:

- ✧ replacing written texts with oral and recorded texts
- ✧ reducing the language complexity in learning materials
- ✧ providing peer support and post-session teacher support
- ✧ providing alternative assessment methods.

Considerable effort was expended in ensuring fruitful field placement arrangements. Trainers placed those with limited reading and writing skills in facilities where supervisory staff could spend time with the learner and nurture their skills. It is within the interests of all parties to ensure the success of contingent workers and learners. A trainer explained their placement processes:

How we place them is we meet with the person who is going to supervise the placement so we can get an idea of it. We talk to our trainers and we match them according to their needs and considering their literacy and numeracy. We wouldn't put them [those with limited reading and writing skills] in a facility that is very large, with a very fast pace environment that had a supervisor who was so busy they didn't have the time to provide that extra support for our people who are placed. We would place them in a small facility with someone who would encourage and who could be the bridge ... We wouldn't set anybody up for failure.

Aged care registered training organisation manager

Call centre trainers similarly matched the skills of learners to the needs of organisations, sometimes by advocating job changes. Staff in call centres with limited reading and writing had been placed in work where the demand for these skills is minimal. Some data entry work is of this nature. Outgoing calls also provide greater predictability than incoming calls and may be better suited to those with limited skills.

The aged care registered training organisations we visited worked off-site with their learners some of the time. This allowed them to take a broader view of their educational role and to devote time to key competencies and generic skills. The industry accreditation requirements potentially direct attention to cultural diversity, systems understanding, transferability, learning and communication skills, including workplace cultural awareness. The workplace context provides the point of application, but the off-site environment provides space for reflection, discussion of theory and the comparison of experience between sites. It allows learners to go back to the primary texts used by their industry and assess the point of view or perspective which has become dominant.

The registered training organisation managers at the research worksites had a pivotal role in setting training priorities. They highlighted values and policies relating to language and literacy learners. They initiated discussions among staff about the questions of quality, consistency and equity that arise in training those with limited literacy, encouraged staff to share their strategies in accommodating language and literacy learners in teaching and assessment, and stressed the role of trainers in accommodating such learners. The registered training organisations we visited were dedicated to high-quality training. However, anecdotal evidence from agencies and facilities suggested that many other training organisations provide a 'quick and dirty' qualification. Informants mentioned qualifications, gained on the basis of recognition of prior learning, where learners had literacy needs and were ignored and they graduated still unable to complete the required documentation. Others mentioned courses taught in a few days and attracted learners because they provided a qualification that would make them employable rapidly. Standards between registered training organisations appear to be variable in relation to educational values and practice. A more explicit accountability requirement on key competencies and generic skills and their link to the needs of the industry may ensure quality training is more universally embraced.

In the registered training organisations we investigated, industry literacies were carefully addressed. In one registered training organisation, a specialist language and literacy teacher assisted in identifying needs and supporting learners to develop skills. The organisation also took an integrated approach, and language, generic knowledge and skill development were identified as the responsibility of all teachers. However, off-site training addressed these issues more thoroughly than exclusive worksite training. Call centre trainers operating on-site were locked into key performance indicators and pared back to a narrow focus on the enterprise-based competencies considered to be essential by the employer. Some of these dealt with complex interactional analysis, and professional educators were strategic in drawing out the learning potential of key performance indicators. Peer training and support were sometimes indirectly represented in key performance indicators and could be marketed to companies as a contribution to leadership development. Recognition of leadership skills can be offered to trainees through the business services packages, particularly in the revised Training and Assessment (TAA) Training Package.

However, it must be said that literacy attracts some heat within registered training organisations. It is often seen as the domain of a specialist and too complex for those not especially trained. It is also seen to be attracting disproportionate attention, particularly in aged care, and seen to overshadow and sometimes compromise quality of care priorities. One example cited was that of an ethnic-specific aged care facility where staff were employed on the basis of their English literacy above that of their culture and ethnicity.

## Frameworks and practices

*Research question 6: What frameworks and practices can aid:*

- ♦ *the transfer of literacy skills for transient employees?*
- ♦ *training personnel and employers in maintaining standards with transient workers?*

Call centres provide a transparent and effective model for establishing and maintaining literacy standards, continuity of service and workplace standards. However, the practices adopted have high costs. Apart from the financial cost of skill development, there are two other costs:

- ♦ the human cost  
The industry is very stressful, resulting in
  - high turnover and hidden injury
  - considerable energy in managing employees' attitudes.
- ♦ the educational cost  
Educational programs are narrow and behaviourist. They do not address the broader learning, employability and generic skills for the smart workforce.

Aged care facilities can learn from the positives of the call centre training system which are:

- ♦ feedback
- ♦ clarity of goals
- ♦ supported learning.

The challenge for aged care facilities is to create a culture of learning to:

- ♦ demystify systems and procedures perceived as threatening
- ♦ welcome technology
- ♦ share and exchange staff knowledge.

Aged care workers expressed greater work satisfaction than call centre workers.

Agency networks provide learning opportunities for aged care casuals which are not available in the customer service industries.

The key issues for workplaces with contingent workers are:

- ✧ establishing and maintaining workplace literacy standards with a casualised workforce
- ✧ sustaining continuity, quality and levels of service.

Proceduralisation is the most valuable mechanism to ensure satisfactory outcomes in relation to these issues. However, there are significant risks associated with it, particularly in aged care where professional knowledge has been fragmented.

While proceduralisation has provided low-skilled employees with access to previously privileged knowledge, many aged care professionals spoke with concern about the limited knowledge available to the aged through personal care attendants.

How do you expect a girl, when she sees someone sitting a bit strangely ... to know that this guy's having heart problems, she hasn't a clue. They [personal care attendants] didn't learn that ... But if you don't do anything for this guy, just say 'well that's strange', [it could be fatal] ... we have now a chart on the wall that says ... A pulse higher than this, call the doctor, lower than that, call the doctor. But they have no idea what's going on. So if someone's getting a cardiac problem, a heart problem whatever, they don't know, someone has internal bleeding, they cannot know it. They don't learn it.

(Aged care worker)

In the context of numeracy, the preceding quote typifies what occurs within the industry. Personal care attendants recorded numbers rather than manipulate or calculate them. Monitoring health readings as well as food safety temperatures were areas where numeracy requirements were most evident. However, understanding the implications of the numbers was not to be assumed. A similar level of operation was evident in the management of drugs. Personal care attendants administered drugs with the aid of 'blister packs' which contained doses particularised for each individual. The packs were filled by pharmacists. Only Division 1 nurses were legally able to administer medication. Division 2 registered nurses were not considered sufficiently trained but personal care attendants

were not registered and therefore outside the purview of the regulators. While Division 2 nurses would contravene the regulations by administering drugs, personal care attendant activities were not regulated. This appears to be something of a loop-hole which allows facilities to function without fully trained nursing staff.

Another significant cost of proceduralisation is the loss of local literacies. Local literacies nurture a community of practice where collaboration, expertise and problem-solving are active and cultures of learning can thrive (Billett 2001). Workplaces based on compliance which reference remote authorities may not develop skills consistent with the smart economy said to be needed for competitive, global economies (ANTA 2003). The continuous improvement principles specified in the accreditation documents have allowed some people to contribute to the thinking of the organisation at the local site and there have been many instances where hierarchical facilities have listened to the voice of those at the bottom for the first time. At the same time, the preoccupation with compliance visible in most aged care facilities has overshadowed attention to the growth of autonomy and knowledge resources at the local level. For some, the outcome has been a decline in morale, the depersonalisation of work, the loss of intellectual involvement and emotional satisfaction. This is a serious concern which has limited impact upon contingent employees, but is an important issue for literacy teachers. Vibrant local literacies potentially allow the development of critical literacy skills. An appropriate balance between local and centralised literacies is a goal the literacy community needs to take up with employers. Call centres likewise need to be attentive to this matter.

It is the mechanisms of proceduralisation which best facilitate the ongoing contribution of the contingent workforce, and here it appears, the call centre cultures have worked the formula well. Those we visited appeared to have mastered issues of transfer and standards maintenance, having established only a small operational differentiation between contingent and ongoing employees. Utilising the tools of micro-management and supported by positive supervisory staff, management interests seemed to be well served. While there was a significant investment in skill development (described as the largest budget item in one of the research centres), the perceived rewards (to the management) were the high levels of conformity from all staff, contingent and ongoing alike, as well as measurable outcomes which could demonstrate competitive values for performance in global industries. There were, however, a number of significant costs associated with its application in this industry. One was a human cost, the other was educational. A discussion of them is relevant here, since the worth of the model can only be assessed when weighed against the cost.

The human cost was expressed by staff. A large number of interviewees found the work barely tolerable. They found the pressure of time measures and the intense surveillance made the job very stressful. Moreover, the repetitive nature of the job made it boring but the need to maintain attention to detail made it very taxing. John Ellery, a union organiser from the Communications, Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU), stands by the comments he made to the *Sunday Age* in May 1999:

Call centres are some of the most dangerous workplaces around. It's more dangerous working in there than with real hardware. There's no blood spilled but there's a lot of mental injuries. The human beings working in them are breaking down all the time. It's the plague of the 1990s. (Ellery quoted in Johnson 1999, p.10)

Some centres are said to be particularly stressful but those participating in this project worked consistently to alleviate the stress. They have attempted to hold on to their staff rather than sustain the 'churn and burn' approach to employment which is said to characterise much of the industry. Nonetheless, managing morale was a central concern of supervisors, along with managing the perceptions of staff so that they identified the feedback system as a learning relationship rather than one based on surveillance and distrust. Hence there were two levels of activity for supervisors: one to do with managing performance, the other to do with managing attitude.

In managing attitudes, call centres worked hard to create a jovial environment. Teams selected names for themselves which reflected popular music and media culture. Calendar events were

celebrated—Mothers' Day, St Patrick's Day. Opportunities for socialising were exploited and much was made of social rituals and work achievements. Some offered free medical and leisure services such as massages, bone density tests and yoga classes. The relationship between supervisor and staff seemed very positive, with the team leader usually identifying him/herself as one of 'us' (the workers) rather than one of 'them' (the management). One company proudly announced a drop in employee turnover from the industry average, said to be 33%, down to the low twenties and reducing. However, it was clear that their best efforts still have some way to go before they could convince all staff to embrace the work with enthusiasm. The high turnover rate in the industry is reflected in the large number of traineeships taken up in the area with relatively low graduation outcomes. The drop-out rate was estimated at 30%.

The industry is recognised as one which, in the jargon of the industry, is 'hostile for stressors', and as a result is characterised by high levels of absenteeism (Australian Call Centre Report 1998). Trainers and supervisors assist operators to develop 'stress hardiness' by encouraging rational self-talk. This is where maturity and life experience builds resilience. Some who had been in call centres for years reported becoming 'much harder' in their personal relationships as a result of their work. They have become more assertive and less willing to 'take any \*\*\*\*' from others.

Occupational Overuse Syndrome is also a factor reported as an issue for operators. Recommended hourly breaks for those working at computer stations rarely took place. According to our informants, the threat of outsourcing and downsizing has created a culture of resilience, compliance and perseverance among staff so that injuries often go unreported and staff sought their own cures.

The cost to educational values is the second area of significant concern identified in this project. Research into the skill needs of the new worker in globalised competitive industry demonstrates that employers are seeking a broad range of skills associated with adaptability, learning, innovation and autonomy. Most frameworks which identify and describe generic skills reject a narrow compilation of skills. The OECD DeSeCo Project (2002) includes skills concerned with participation in democratic processes and the ability to contribute to social cohesion and human rights. They refer to 'a sense of service to the community' and 'civic mindedness'.

Researchers such as Cox (1995), Schofield (1999), and Jaakola, Ropo and Autio (1995) are in agreement in their calls for a broader range of skills which extend into community and social capital. The lifelong learning aspirations of the government and the economy lend strength to the call. However, the call centre training we encountered was so narrowly focused on performance there was no room for literacies beyond the rigid boundaries of the telephone interchange required by the organisation. Furthermore, there appeared to be little tolerance for a critical literacy which questioned the values of compliance and technical competence. One informant talked of instances where employees were 'paid to leave'. Their transgressions related to being involved in highlighting the shortcomings of an unpopular team leader or concerned a workcover issue. Matters pertaining to ethics or the pressures of compliance were not publicly debated. That was just 'part of the job' and those unable to come to terms with this were seen to be unsuited for this type of work.

This was reflected in the narrow scope of the call centre learning program. Down (2002) in her analysis of levels of learning argues that most of our formal learning is restricted to base level characterised by 'conditioning through the acquisition of responses deemed correct within a given context':

Yet our learning from life ... is far more complex and requires much higher skill levels in making judgements and comparisons than the memorising of material and its regurgitation.  
(Down 2002, p.4)

Nevertheless, call centre workers are unlikely to remain in the industry for extended periods so it is important that they build their learning and generic skills. According to a union source, five or six years ago, Telstra had 60 regional call centres dedicated to directory assistance. It now has 11 and the centres continue to close as a result of outsourcing and increased technology. Operators in these regions are most likely to be seeking work in other industries, since few are likely to have other call



centre businesses in their region. The formal training offered in most call centres does not prepare employees for the world of work outside the domain of call centre work apart from the by-products referred to earlier learned through their experience of work. They are minutely prepared for the skills and aptitudes of the key performance indicators of their organisation, indicating that the training is highly effective for the set purpose. However, this leaves open the question of whether the training meets the needs of the individual or the economy. It pays no attention to the learning skills, transferability and broad-based skills required for employability and community participation. Accredited training is wedded to notions of transferability but interpreted within the call centre framework—there is no capacity to address the issue. The training and expertise prepared learners for subservience rather than to act as ‘free agents’ in the ‘smart workforce’.

Training based narrowly on behaviourist approaches, as demonstrated in the call centres we visited in this project, has been critiqued by educational theorists over many years. The debate raged a decade ago (Marsick 1991; Brown 1991; Stevenson 1993; Stevenson & McKavanagh 1992; Gribble 1990; Deakin 1994). The issues have been reiterated more recently in evaluation studies such as those of Mulcahy and James (1999) and Billet et al. (1999). These commentators argue that these approaches are not the most effective for facilitating reflective, critical and analytical learning. Critics of such approaches suggest that they are more suited to developing superficial knowledge and passive replication of skill. This exposes a potential contradiction between the aspirations of the workplace and those of a training system aspiring to produce ‘clever’, creative workers capable of problem-solving, continuous improvement and critical thinking.

The implications of these observations are that, despite the strengths of the training system in the call centres we studied, the strategies adopted may not be broad enough to meet the demands of a smart workforce, where judgement, debate, creativity and decision-making are part of the generic framework. The voice of industry employers tends to corroborate the observation that genuine generic skills and key competency development are essential (Curtis & McKenzie 2001) particularly within the context of the ‘high turnover’ workforce.

## Possibilities for aged care

The two industries involved in this study are fundamentally different. Aged care facilities can, however, draw upon the strengths of call centre training to address some of the shortfalls that beset them. In matters of feedback, goal setting and training support, call centres offer an outstanding model.

Many agency staff in aged care facilities complained about being left to find out workplace priorities and systems on their own. Many said they were given no feedback:

I’d come home at night and I kept thinking ‘I can do this, this has got to be easier’. But it just got harder for the fact that there was no feedback. (Aged care casual)

Where ‘buddy’ partnerships between ongoing and casual employees were established as support relationships, it was reported that buddies frequently abandoned the casual employee to avoid the unpaid overtime that would accrue if the allocated work was not achieved on time.

The ambiguity of the goals as interpreted in different organisations meant that casual workers’ reading of the culture could be inaccurate. Those who spent time talking to residents were open to reprimand in some institutions or those who reported small bruises or skin tears could be dismissed as too fussy.

Like call centres, aged care facilities preferred contingent workers who were familiar with their organisation, but unforeseen emergencies and the imperatives of covering a shift resulted in new faces appearing constantly in some facilities. Greater consistency and more transparent cultural values could be achieved if feedback and buddy systems were more structured and thorough.

Orientation processes in aged facilities we visited were scant. In most cases, casual employees were given the mandatory orientation to the workplace but little more. They were shown the emergency

procedures, the toilets and cloak room and most were given standard material on the nature of the facility, its values, mission statement and the basic expectations of employees. However, these offered little assistance in understanding workplace culture. Most aged care facilities do not have the resources to manage the level of support, demonstration and feedback offered in the call centres we visited. Many contingent workers found themselves alone, muddling on as best they could.

Facilities can assist in making expectations explicit by providing illustrated procedures with a minimal amount of word-based text. Some facilities provided checklists and summarised care plans for newcomers. Agency staff were more confident of expectations when such information was available and accessible. Casual staff are always struggling to find a balance between the time and information demands of the job, so accessibility is particularly important. Plain English techniques had been applied in many facilities, but it would appear that in most facilities they have not been applied to the essential mandatory documentation. As facilities get bigger in order to secure financial viability, the weight of written communication will grow. It is important that the industry responds to the plea from employees, almost all of whom are against the burden imposed by the huge amount of written material.

In some instances considerable effort has been applied to adapting communication methods to the needs of employees. At least one consulting company working in the industry offers a performance appraisal system designed with the needs of all staff in mind. It aims to minimise anxiety and encourage ownership of the process. The activities are group-based and ease participants into the task. They require very little reading and writing and make use of approaches based on games. These approaches could be generalised to a number of other activities such as demystifying care plans, material safety data sheets, incident reports or occupational health and safety systems.

It is inevitable that the industry will gradually become more computerised as facilities become larger and the technological changes experienced in the medical profession become generalised to the aged care industry (Cook-Gumperz & Hanna 1997). The application of computers to care plans and other documentation will relieve some of the duplication of documentation currently experienced, but there are inherent tensions here for those with limited reading and writing skills. The current demographic of staff in aged care facilities is one attuned to manual rather than electronic recording processes, and the transformation of this culture will present a challenge. It is to be hoped that the technology will be accompanied with input from plain English experts. However, recognising the inevitability of the technology, facilities would be well advised to gradually incorporate electronic technologies and their associated literacies into facility procedures as soon as possible.

A number of staff we encountered in aged care facilities resisted new learning and were not open to supporting learners. Further work is needed in aged care facilities to welcome those who don't know, who interrupt and need assistance. Contingent employees talked of facilities where there was a lack of sympathy for their needs and many expressed a sense of alienation and isolation. These attitudes are destructive not only for casual staff, but for the ongoing workforce. They militate against the sharing of knowledge, the development of expertise and of an effective community of practice. Casual employees are a resource which can open the organisation to outside experience. A common practice in the industry is for ongoing staff to add to their salaries by making themselves available for work with agencies. Ongoing staff reported a number of new ideas they had imported into their facility as a result of these experiences in other workplaces. Contingent, particularly agency, staff are rarely drawn into discussions about continuous improvement but they carry with them a wealth of experience.

Nevertheless, generally speaking, aged care contingent workers expressed greater work satisfaction than call centre employees, despite their low salary. Their emotional engagement in their work was high. They used words such as 'commitment', 'passion' and 'understanding' to describe their relationship to their work. The importance of their work was visible and the gratitude expressed by residents and their families was immediate. Their dissatisfaction arose when the system would not allow them to provide the level of care they saw as optimum. For most, their motivation emanated from their desire to care. However, many call centre operators involved in this study persisted in

their work because of the external motivators—the remuneration, the convenience of location and shift schedules and the incentives offered by the company.

The importance attached by staff to the caring role is a very positive asset for aged care managers and employers. It is an asset which could be optimised in the management of contingent employees by maximising their contribution to caring through the way their work is organised and the way their skills are recognised and rewarded. Motivators and incentives could be offered around indices of caring.

## Personal care attendants with literacy needs

For contingent workers with limited reading and writing skills, the key issues were:

- ✧ surviving in the current work environment by managing their conditions of employment thereby:
  - ◆ accommodating the limited applicability of their reading and writing skills
  - ◆ maintaining their cultural literacy in the workplace/s
  - ◆ dealing with factors which gnaw away at personal satisfaction, particularly isolation and alienation
- ✧ securing future employment by attending to their employability skills through:
  - ◆ building their own kitbag of ‘employability’ skills
  - ◆ extending their reading and writing skills appropriate to the industry.

There are no new answers for this group. Facilities need to maximise efficiencies in communicating with staff, and managers, trainers and staff all agreed that relevant literacies are essential. It must be recognised that many contingent workers have taken on the work because they want minimal involvement. They have other priorities in their lives and casual employment allows them the space they need. However, the pressure to maintain skills and knowledge and to upgrade communication skills is unrelenting.

The infrastructure growing up around the casual workforce is significant. There are a number of facilities serving the nursing industry which appear to have responded to a call for support for casual employees. Networks such as Nursing Australia provide free training, internet access and networking opportunities to all nurses and allied health care workers registered with them. They also provide meeting spaces and coffee lounge facilities. They have a network of centres throughout the country—in all capital cities and in some regions. They provide refresher courses for those returning to the industry after a break. They have a program to support new graduates and they send staff to rural areas for temporary placement in order to enhance the experience of staff and relieve the staffing shortages in regional locations. They also provide lectures for those with specialist interests and, as a registered training organisation, provide a full suite of training courses at certificate III level. Most courses are free to members. Programs are funded from resources drawn from agency fees.

It appears that most, maybe all agencies are associated with a network such as this. These organisations can assist with career development and are able to counsel clients in vocational matters. However, it appears that casual employees are not yet fully utilising these resources. No interviewee mentioned the resource. It may be that agencies need to publicise the services offered by these organisations more thoroughly, and that agencies need to more strategically target and recruit casuals and contingent workers in the industry.

Given the low values placed on transferability that we experienced in call centres, it is unlikely that a resource such as this would be deemed as useful to the call centre industry. However, the revised training package recognises the links between call centre work and other forms of customer contact activity. Hence graduates may apply their qualification to a range of employment possibilities. It may be that, in the future, support organisations such as those available to nurses will become available within the customer service sector. Such organisations could provide a hub for training, networking and job management.

# Issues and implications

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## For policy-makers

If we are to believe the 'free agent' rhetoric (Pink 2001), we would conclude that casual and contract employment and self-entrepreneurship suits employees just as well as government authorities and employers. However, such rhetoric describes the aspirations and work world of professional consultants and trades contractors rather than low-paid casual employees working in the service industries.

The current situation is worrying if we are to believe Watson et al.'s (2003) findings of the gulf forming between those at the bottom of the employment hierarchy and those at the top. Their findings demonstrate that Australia is likely to follow the pattern emerging in the United States of an increasingly poorly paid, highly taxed, deskilled, intermittently employed underclass supporting an increasingly better paid, well-educated middle class. The life experience of the working poor in the United States is graphically related by Ehrenreich (2002) who assumed membership of the underclass for three months. Casualised labour, high levels of surveillance, low wages, ever-increasing production targets and minimal opportunities for progression are all elements of the American system. Most of these trends are represented in the industries we visited throughout this study.

The Australian VET system has the capacity to assist in preventing the destructive social consequences of these trends by ensuring that:

- ✧ the system meets broad educational and community goals (including those of building social capital) as well as enterprise and industry goals
- ✧ the integrity of professional and trades skills is maintained
- ✧ opportunities for progression are open and supported
- ✧ qualifications relate closely to work on offer in both narrow and broad terms.

The vulnerability of contingent workers is compounded by the insecurity of their employment arrangements and the narrowness of their training. A narrow emphasis on proceduralisation and functional, directly applicable learning, produces workers with skills of compliance and replication. These skills assure their position in the increasingly vulnerable category of the working poor in globalised economies such as described by Ehrenreich (2002). The call centre training we witnessed did not comprise an education system committed to developing innovation, creativity, independent learners and decision-makers. The corollary here may be that a greater involvement of external trainers in off-site training may assist in correcting the balance and providing a better 'triangulation' of responsibility between providers, worksites and government authority. While the training system needs to serve the particular company, it also needs to serve the community, the individual and the broader economy.

If the role of vocational education and training can be conceived in these terms, then generic skills and key competencies need to be addressed more comprehensively. In terms of Lankshear's (2000) levels of literacy, the findings of this study suggest that many call centre operators have limited capacity to critically evaluate their workplaces, and contingent workers, both aged care and call centre, have even less.

If we take it as given that the VET system cannot endorse a truncated development of literacy skills and a partial development of generic skills, then the challenge is clear. In what ways can the VET system support the more comprehensive, critical and three-dimensional concepts of training and literacy demanded by the contemporary world of work and employment? The findings of this research suggest:

- ✧ It needs to be recognised that critical literacy (and critical thinking) are essential to high-quality vocational education (wherever it may be delivered).
- ✧ Effective pedagogy is required to recognise, highlight and develop the particular literacies appropriate, not only to each training package, but to each context where the training package may be relevant.
- ✧ Professional development is required on the functional, cultural and critical dimensions of literacy for trainers and assessors involved in vocational education.

More specifically, there are implications for the use of training packages, for trainers (and training of trainers) and for employers. These issues are addressed in the following concluding section.

## Use of training packages

Attached to questions about the use of training packages are questions about cultural literacies. This research demonstrates that competence at a functional level is dependent upon cultural variables. Despite attempts to ensure that the training package incorporates various contexts and values, the tendency within registered training organisations is to focus upon the discrete units of competence and associated assessments to the detriment of industry, the needs of the workplace, the economy and the community. The ‘vagueness’ and ‘flexibility’ of the training package created concern for some providers. One manager described it as:

... a dog’s breakfast ... we’re looking at this particular unit and it’s got four elements but that element is almost identical to an element that we covered in another unit. It’s just this kind of vagary that seems to be attached to the training package.

(Aged care registered training organisation manager)

While she acknowledged the improvements in the revised package, she believes that the earlier ‘trainer friendly’ Swinburne curriculum:

... gave the trainer a greater sense that everything has been covered, nothing has been possibly left out of this.

(Aged care registered training organisation manager)

She remarked that the package allowed trainers to avoid contentions and difficult issues, such as sexuality in aged care; however, these were essential and important areas of concern.

The Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training does not equip trainers to develop curriculum from the work environment or to interpret the units from a broad industry and community perspective. Trainers felt there was insufficient guidance to assist them in making curriculum decisions. One trainer likened it to driving a car:

You could ... sit me in the car and leave me there long enough till I’d worked out how to drive it. If I stayed there long enough maybe I could drive it ... But we ... need to have some knowledge ... it depends on how far back you want to take it. Do I take a course in mechanics first ... do I actually start from there? Where’s the point of start?

(Aged care registered training organisation manager)

Trainers involved in this project understood workplace cultures well. However, teachers admitted the difficulties associated with integrated and contextualised program development and assessment.

Trainers did not consciously address transferability issues, but where programs were delivered off-site, comparisons were made between the experiences of individual learners. Trainees were asked what they would do in different circumstances. It was recognised that:

You will be asked to compromise your values and you'll then go through some moral and ethical issues personally if you wish to work in this sector. (Aged care trainer)

The mixture of skills earned off-site and their subsequent contextualised application provided a rich learning environment and an opportunity to develop learners' reflective capacity. The correct balance between on- and off-the-job learning is difficult to achieve. However, generally speaking, a mix of on- and off-site learning may provide both opportunities for practice of skills and for reflection and the broadening of knowledge.

Our previous research demonstrated that generic skills and key competencies also need to be viewed in the context of particular work environments. It is clear from this work that the requisite workplace literacies can not be 'delivered' in a simplistic sense. They require interpretation, exposition, clarification and articulation at the local level. Literacies, in Lankshear's (2000) terms, must be culturally appropriate. Training packages could address the development of generic skills. They could direct attention to the relevant skill features and the sorts of questions trainers might ask to assist learners monitoring and enriching their generic skill development.

It was also clear that further professional development and leadership are needed to assist teachers (and the other stakeholders involved) to grasp and implement integrated, holistic and contextualised approaches. This is not the first research to identify this systemic need (Schofield 2000; Sanguinetti & Hartley 2000).

Key messages	Implications
<p><i>Developing curriculum</i></p> <p>Trainers find it difficult to use the training package to define a comprehensive learning program.</p>	<p>Trainers need specific development in this area which extends beyond the current Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. The revised package, Training and Assessment, addresses this issue; however, it is questionable whether the level of the certificate will provide the complex development necessary to equip trainers for this task.</p>
<p><i>Company learning agendas</i></p> <p>Companies dictate on-site learning, leaving no space for broader educational needs and responsibilities which they do not see as their responsibility and are reluctant to pay for.</p>	<p>Off-site training can provide a space to address broader educational issues beyond the immediate functional interests of employers. This does not necessarily imply a change to the cost structure since these training arrangements are already available.</p>
<p><i>Who defines competence</i></p> <p>External auditors disproportionately influence notions of competence and concentrate attention on specific practices encouraging compliant literacy rather than critical literacy.</p>	<p>Trainers need to focus critical attention onto the regulatory frameworks and the training package in assessing practices which demonstrate fidelity to the principles. Debate on these issues enhances literacy skills in the three dimensions discussed in this report.</p>
<p><i>Identifying transferability skills</i></p> <p>Trainers do not recognise transferability as a specific objective; rather, it is seen as a common-sense outcome of competence.</p>	<p>Transferability needs to be identified as a significant generic skill essential to workers in the current fluid workforce. Trainers need to recognise its dynamics and draw it into prominence in the training environment.</p>
<p><i>Developing transferability</i></p> <p>Off-site learning, bringing together learners from different organisations, provides a richer environment for addressing transferability.</p>	<p>This corroborates the earlier suggestion for a mixed mode of delivery; however, trainers also need to recognise their responsibility in developing transferability.</p>
<p><i>Proceduralisation</i></p> <p>Proceduralisation closes off dialogues which allow critical thinking and encourages a compliant workforce.</p>	<p>Employers and on-site trainers need to be sensitive to the discourses or potential discourses at local sites which have the capacity to develop lively communities of practice. Policy-makers need to foster local strong communities of practice.</p>

## For trainers

As noted above, training packages are, by definition, general in their understanding of skill, and are intended to be flexible in their application. The skills of the trainer lie in constructing learning for individual learners in response to workplace cultures. The trainers we encountered were experienced and fully immersed in their industries. Although they expressed reservations about the training packages, they were generally alert to the concerns of their learners and workplaces and creative in their approach to the learning potential of work environments. At the same time they were diligent in their interpretation of the guidelines and anxious to mould their practices to fit within the framework. The work environment tended to be subservient to the elements and units. Rather than using the accredited qualifications as a means of recognising the skills in the workplace, the units dictate what skills should be demonstrated in the job.

As the accreditation document has constrained the vision of aged care workers, training packages and their auditing process have constrained the vision and possibilities for trainers. Trainers are unsure about how to maximise learning in the work environment and yet are determined to fit essential units and elements into workplace programs, regardless of their relevance, in order to comply with the regulatory frameworks.

Those who viewed the industry through the lens of the units of the training package often ignored the context and the industry, despite the fact that diversity and cultural variation are stressed in the range statements and evidence guides. Many trainers encountered throughout the course of the project were hungry for guidance, boundaries and specified curriculum, and were less willing to look to the industry and learners to guide their practice than to auditors and training authorities. The trainer is the conduit between industry and accredited qualifications—the person who attempts to ensure the integrity of both is preserved. The accredited qualification, however, has a broad range of interests to accommodate—individual learners, educational validity, industry and the wider community. Like aged care and call centre operators, teachers and trainers need to exercise their critical literacies and take up the opportunity to provide commentary on the educational values and methods at work in the organisation. Trainers need to have a comprehensive overview of their roles, one which takes account of the industry as well as social and economic contexts. Teachers and trainers are then better equipped to make informed evaluative and comparative judgements.

Literacy teachers and advocates should be particularly aware of their role in disseminating and defining the common language which proceduralisation has established. They need an understanding of the dynamics of proceduralisation which prevents dissenting points of view from being aired. While educators need to ensure that their learners can interact within the dominant discourse, they need to be sensitive to the balance of discussion in the workplace and recognise their role in nurturing a vibrant community of practice. Such communities encourage the growth of local knowledge, expertise and networks and the development of skills beyond that of compliance. The continuous improvement strategies provide potential for this. Action learning projects which deepen and extend diversity in workplace identity and apply research and questioning skills need to balance activities such as the preparation of documentation for regulators. Bearing in mind the interests of call centres, such projects can be utilised in the development and application of generic skills among learners and enable an exploration of meta-level learning-to-learn skills.

Informed debate, the sharing of knowledge and the struggle for acceptable compromise are essential generic skills in dynamic industry cultures (Billett 2001; Virgona et al. 2003; Senge 1991; Weisbord 1987). If trainers cannot ensure that these qualities characterise the work environment, they can encourage their development in learning environments. However, this skill, like that of capitalising on workplace learning opportunities, is beyond the training of graduates in Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training.

Issues	Implications
<p><i>Responding to a complex environment</i></p> <p>Trainers have become subservient to regulatory authorities, sometimes losing sight of the integrity of the principles contained in the regulatory documents and the training package.</p>	<p>With only Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, it is asking a great deal of trainers to find their way in a world of conflicting demands. More complex and thorough education is needed for trainers. The revised training package addresses some of these design issues but is yet to be tested for its effectiveness. It appears the needs will go well beyond even the revised package.</p>
<p><i>Holistic development</i></p> <p>Trainers, particularly literacy educators, have a dual responsibility—to the common context of the industry (global and regulatory) and to the local discourse, where local expertise, wellbeing and personal growth can best be addressed. In restricted learning environments such as call centres, the second is usually diminished.</p>	<p>Once again certificate IV trained trainers struggle to respond to a call such as this. The revised Training and Assessment package requires accountability for key competencies; however, experience and continuing education and professional development are necessary to deliver on these outcomes.</p>
<p><i>Training package guidance</i></p> <p>Trainers often do not respond to the complexities of the units in the training package. They often overlook the range of variables and the evidence guide, resulting in a slavish adherence to the units and elements.</p>	<p>Workshops with trainers should alert them to how training and assessment may be made appropriate to various work environments. Workshops can address modifications and adaptations of programs and assessments drawing on the advice of the training package and the principles of the systems.</p>
<p><i>Outcomes focus</i></p> <p>External regulatory authorities exercise undue influence in defining competence (as mentioned above). As a result, assessment often looks for sanctioned practices and ticksheet methods.</p>	<p>Trainers need to be educated to apply a more complex understanding of competence. Rather than being dictated by sanctioned practices, they need to actualise Sandberg's understanding of competence which is focused on work relations and outcomes rather than replicated practices.</p>
<p><i>Generic skills</i></p> <p>Trainers have a poor understanding of generic skills, including transferability. They are not addressed in learning, despite the fluid nature of employment in both industries.</p>	<p>Trainers and teachers need assistance in identifying these skills and drawing learners' attention to them so they can be monitored and developed.</p>

## For employers

This research prompts us to alert employers to the importance of developing workplace learning cultures which will equip their staff to confront the ongoing changes presented by the economic forces currently affecting today's workers and to develop the 'smart workforce' highlighted in the literature. In particular, it directs employers to seek a better balance between values of proceduralisation and those of dynamic and contributive local environments which reach beyond the narrow confines of compliance.

The summary comments for employers are divided into two sections—one which relates to aged care and the other to the call centre industry.



# Aged care

Key message	Implications
<p><i>Documentation</i></p> <p>Employees found reading and writing tasks alienating and intimidating. Documentation was difficult to access and follow and was daunting in its amount.</p> <p>Casuals have no time to read written materials; the documentation therefore needs the capacity to be communicated quickly and effectively.</p>	<p>Management could establish a practice of modelling and celebrate simple, accessible styles of writing. Relevant documentation should adopt plain English approaches by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>♦ summarising to reduce bulk</li> <li>♦ type-setting to reduce density</li> <li>♦ colour coding to distinguish different categories of documentation</li> <li>♦ replacing words with symbols and drawings where possible</li> <li>♦ using actual labels when referring to particular products</li> <li>♦ adopting a patterned format with clear headings to assist in providing predictability</li> <li>♦ using logos for particular functions to identify different documents; for example, staff meeting minutes or occupational health and safety material.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Alternative processes</i></p> <p>Inclusive and non-threatening processes for conducting appraisals are available in the industry. They involve group-led workshops where texts are read and discussed using interactive and games-based approaches.</p>	<p>Such models could be applied to any number of processes which mystify and alienate some staff such as incident reports, care plans or Residential Classification Scale funding requirements.</p>
<p><i>Local communities of practice</i></p> <p>Energy is absorbed into compliance requirements at the cost of local knowledge and expertise and the development of a committed community of practice and culture of learning.</p>	<p>Opportunities for exchanging ideas and problem-solving workshops on complex issues outside that of compliance will assist in building a rich work culture. Such events should include contingent workers whenever possible.</p>
<p><i>Inclusive communication</i></p> <p>As facilities get larger in an effort to remain viable as businesses, more remote communication modes will proliferate.</p>	<p>Facilities need to maintain awareness of the impediments for some staff with communication that is not face to face. Intermediaries and support mechanisms need to ensure that communication is effective.</p>
<p><i>Introducing information technologies</i></p> <p>Many aged care staff were unfamiliar with computers and information technology systems but their introduction into facilities is inevitable.</p>	<p>Facilities could introduce information technology gradually but ensuring that its use is widespread, for example, used in place of paper-based pay claims and invoices.</p> <p>Facilities need to be well advised in designing screens to counteract fear responses from staff. The plain English advice above should apply to technology-based literacies.</p>
<p><i>Computer-based documentation</i></p> <p>Software packages have recently been released which minimise the literacy demands of documentation. They provide a comprehensive set of care plans, progress notes and forms. The package available through ICare is an intelligent system which provides a selection of likely conditions and, on the basis of the choices made, will predict treatment regimes and interventions which can be modified and adapted.</p>	<p>Use of these programs depends upon a level of print and computer literacy and the availability of computers within facilities—there are significant implications here for professional development and change management processes.</p>
<p><i>Alienation of contingent workers</i></p> <p>Contingent workers were expected to know the systems, the culture and the values of a facility. They were also expected to know their way around after minimal orientation.</p>	<p>Contingent workers could be partnered with an experienced staff member who is willing to be supportive and is accountable for this role.</p>
<p><i>Feedback to contingent workers</i></p> <p>Contingent workers did not get sufficient feedback as to their performance.</p>	<p>Staff who partner contingent workers could ensure that formal and informal feedback was provided.</p>
<p><i>Contingent outside the loop</i></p> <p>Contingent workers in the facilities bank rarely attended staff meetings or professional development sessions because they were not paid and timing was inconvenient. Funds were not available for payment and incentives such as food mostly fail to overcome the obstacles.</p>	<p>Contingent workers have other priorities in their lives and see their employment arrangements as temporary. When they return to work as permanents they plan to change their priorities. Most are unlikely to attend staff meetings or undertake professional development unless paid and then only if timing is manageable for them. However, employers need to develop an inclusive culture and one which encourages information sharing.</p>

Key message	Implications
<p><i>Skill development for contingent workers</i></p> <p>Many contingent workers, both agency and non-agency, were unwilling to participate in skills development because of childcare and study commitments. Cost was less inhibiting than the time barriers.</p> <p><i>Sharing knowledge</i></p> <p>Contingent workers offer an important resource in that they have extensive experience that was not being shared. This resource was not recognised by facilities.</p> <p><i>Work satisfaction</i></p> <p>Aged care workers derive most satisfaction from their work in the relationships they form with aged people.</p>	<p>Skills development offered through nursing networks could provide more choice in timetabling and also online resources.</p> <p>Networks should be publicised more effectively to contingent staff since many do not seem to know about their existence.</p> <p>A learning culture needs to develop in aged care facilities. Alienated contingent workers have no inclination or invitation to share their skills. Better buddying relationships and more inclusive and consultative activities may help to free the knowledge exchange.</p> <p>Stronger relationships with agencies may assist in information and knowledge exchange and in making employers conscious of the wealth of experience that casuals can bring into the workplace.</p> <p>Changes which diminish the personal relationships between staff and residents will corrode morale, create distress and compromise the quality of care.</p>

## Call centres

Key messages	Implications
<p><i>Morale</i></p> <p>Pressures of micro-management were overwhelming for many operators.</p> <p><i>Employability</i></p> <p>Technological innovation and off-shore outsourcing have resulted in the closing of many call centres and will continue to do so, leaving staff jobless and many without recognised qualifications.</p> <p><i>Generic skills</i></p> <p>Transferable skills of call centre operators were not clearly valued in the workplaces.</p> <p><i>Positive features of training</i></p> <p>Training systems within professional call centres visited were well staffed, supportive and systematic. Supervisory staff were involved in learning and coaching. The training system provides a good model for other industries.</p> <p><i>Accommodating written literacies</i></p> <p>The workplaces were very tolerant of idiosyncratic written scripts as long as they were decipherable to systems users. This made space for those who were not highly skilled in the use of mainstream written scripts.</p> <p><i>More accommodation possibilities</i></p> <p>General written communication within call centres was not always accessible and it would appear that screens could be further simplified to the advantage of operators and the business.</p>	<p>Incentives and perks have reduced attrition but indications suggest while management practices prevail, the toll will continue.</p> <p>Accredited training offers at least a qualification. Many call centres do not participate in accredited training. The revised training package recognises generic customer relations skills as well as particular call centre skills which may aid employability in the wider customer service sector.</p> <p>Registered training organisations can assist in enacting recognition of prior learning and gap training to provide qualifications to appropriately experienced staff.</p> <p>Specific recognition of generic skills within training packages may assist in profiling and valuing skills developed in call centres. Trainers could provide recognition of key competencies and coaching skills within the proposed Training and Assessment qualification. Recognition of prior learning services may also assist.</p> <p>Positive features need to be disseminated.</p> <p>While email is said to have eroded more formal communication styles, workplaces need to question the stylistic conventions they uphold and whether other styles would be welcomed.</p> <p>Screen, memos and staff information could benefit from a critical evaluation of texts against plain English principles.</p>

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# Appendix A

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## Members of the reference group

The research team was extremely pleased to have support for this project from such distinguished experts as those listed below. Their input helped to assure the quality of the research although the researchers note that the reference group cannot be held accountable for the study or its deficits. They contributed their time, experience and expertise willingly and without remuneration. The members of the reference group were:

Dr Lesley Farrell: Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Monash University

Dr Nancy Jackson: Ontario Institute of Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

Dr Ian Falk: Professor, Faculty of Education, Northern Territory University

Jan Roberts: Manager, Brite Industries

Anthony Hinds: Training Manager, Support Base Training Solutions

John Glover: Executive Director, Group Training Australia

Jenny Jackson: Training Consultant, Adult Migrant Education Service, Victoria

# Appendix B

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## Research protocols

### Data collection at worksites

A consistent approach was formulated in conducting the project at each worksite:

- ✧ An initial approach is made to each organisation where the researcher meets the staff, explains the purpose of the research and elicits support. A subsequent meeting may be required where the researcher introduces the project to aged care residents or casual employees. A sample introductory note was put together upon request of some organisations. The note is to be placed on notice boards.
- ✧ The researcher then commences the communications audit. This involves a two-stage process.
  - i) Informal interviews are conducted with key supervisory staff to establish:
    - ◆ a profile of the organisation and its staff
    - ◆ knowledge of the communication requirements for staff employed in casual roles
    - ◆ expected dispositional knowledge and behaviour
    - ◆ an overview of possible language and literacy hurdles which some staff may find troublesome.

Interviews were audio-taped.

- ii) Using ethnographic research approaches, the researcher observes workplace communication practices such as workplace meetings, documentation requirements and the tacit requirements of dispositional values. He/she shadows members of staff seeking an understanding of the knowledge they are required to bring to the job. The researcher explores the rationale underpinning workers' activity. Sample workplace documents are collected in the process.

The initial contact meeting was conducted at each participating organisation. It provided staff with a briefing covering the following topics:

- ✧ Workplace Learning Initiatives company profile and researcher's background
- ✧ the funding of the research and its place within:
  - ◆ the changing context of adult literacy and adult literacy research
  - ◆ the landscape of national training and skill development
- ✧ confidentiality
- ✧ the confidentiality letter
- ✧ purpose of tape recordings
- ✧ the nature of the investigation at the particular site answering questions such as:
  - ◆ what activities the researcher will undertake during the audit process
  - ◆ who will be involved
  - ◆ how much time it will take.

This initial meeting also allowed the researcher to discuss any misgivings and to clarify timetables.



The on-site audit investigated questions such as the following:

- ✧ What is required of a personal care attendant/kitchen hand ... within the course of a day?
- ✧ What documents are incumbents expected to interact with? (Samples collected)
- ✧ What is the incumbent expected to notice for recording purposes?
- ✧ How do they make decisions as to what warrants recording?
- ✧ What are they required to record?
- ✧ Can you show me the way in which this is to be recorded?
- ✧ How are standards established and maintained for recording?
- ✧ If people require assistance with this, what would they do?
- ✧ How are changes to documentation introduced?
- ✧ What communication skills are incumbents required to have? (Who are they expected to interact with, over what matters and how?)
- ✧ What protocols are followed when a new casual or short-term contract employee comes into the workplace?
- ✧ How are standards enforced and maintained with casual employees?
- ✧ What support is available to casuals if they have difficulty knowing what to do?
- ✧ What are the principles that apply in judging the effectiveness of a casual?

These questions were sometimes asked directly or may have been inferred from observation of interactions and activities within the workplace. Workplace specialists and managers were interviewed in relation to these questions where appropriate.

It should be noted that the researchers tailored and adjusted these (and the following) questions according to the context and particular personnel in each case.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with a range of people who could supply detail relating to the above questions or who fitted into the criteria previously identified for intensive interviews. Questions for intensive interviews were guided by the following questions:

- ✧ How has your job changed within your experience in the industry?
- ✧ Has that been difficult and if so what support have you sought and received?
- ✧ How have you learned this job in this workplace?
- ✧ How is this workplace different from others?
- ✧ How have you made your way through the literacy requirements?
- ✧ What makes literacy tasks easier or more difficult?
- ✧ How have you managed training activities?

## Data collection with registered training organisations

The research design also called for investigation of the role played by training providers. Here the investigation was guided by questions such as:

- ✧ How is literacy understood (by the trainer) in the context of this work, employment and training?
- ✧ What literacies are taught?
- ✧ Is there any testing or assessment of literacy skills as part of the training process? If so, what methods, approaches or processes are used?

- ✧ What artefacts, materials and texts are used in the training?
- ✧ How is transfer between workplaces understood and catered for?
- ✧ What dispositional skills are identified and taught?

Interview questions which provided insights into the political, contextual and enculturated nature of literacy in each workplace were those referred to the institutional expectations and how they are realised:

- ✧ How do you know what to write (or what not to write) here?
- ✧ Who generates the texts 'that count' in this place?
- ✧ What are the expectations of the workplace in this situation? How has that expectation been established? How is it communicated?
- ✧ What support (or criticism) can be expected or demonstrated?
- ✧ What strategies are utilised to address the literacy needs of the workplace?

The data-gathering process also involved collecting seminal texts, particularly standards documents, and determining how these are translated into practice on the floor.



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ISBN I 920895 65 5 print edition

ISBN I 920895 66 3 web edition